



Dropping Off (4)

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A spiritual journey can continue on many different paths, all leading to the ultimate discovery of the Self. Just as all religions point towards one or more Gods who only differ in name, shape and form, so also there are many paths for spiritual evolution. For me it has been the path of Zen, the purest form of Buddha's teaching, just as Advaitya is the purest form of Hindu teaching. And for the most part, the two paths are joined at the hip like Siamese twins, except in one significant respect.

And that has to do with physical clutter.

In all spiritual paths there is a gradual dropping off of various conditionings we have been burdened with all our lives, until we discover the very core and essence of our existence and understand our connection with Consciousness. This happens in order for the energy (prana) within us to flow freely, enabling us to see more clearly, sharpening our intuitive skills, opening our third eye and connecting with the higher Self. Anything that obstructs this natural course of spiritual evolution gets dropped off, whether it is clothes, food, company, habits. All of this I discussed in the earlier parts of this series and will discuss further as we move along. On the Zen path, it is equally important that all physical clutter that surrounds us get dropped off too. The Hindu path does not emphasize this, at least not directly. As a result a typical Hindu home or temple does not exude the same sense of peace and calm. It may contain the most awakened energy of a master or guru, but will not necessarily be clean and simple. Feng Shui is an aspect of Zen philosophy, and it believes that energy is blocked by unnecessary articles kept around as well as misplaced articles. This applies to everything in any space where we spend our time, whether at home or at work or in recreation.

When you visit a Japanese Shinto temple or a Zen monastery, what strikes you immediately is the stark nature of the space, embellished with selectively placed articles and furniture. It immediately radiates a sense of peace and serenity. Meditation would happen naturally and effortlessly in such a shrine. If you are a lover of Japanese architecture as I am, or if you have visited Japanese homes and seen pictures, you will notice an extension of this same serenity within the four walls. No matter how small or big the space, it seems refreshingly light and one immediately feels so relaxed. Everything is neat and tidy. Every item is placed in its proper place. Only natural materials are used for construction. Walls are made of mud and grass and wood. Floors are made from wood or bamboo on which are placed tatami mats made from grass and jute. Shoji screens, made from rice paper and pine wood, serve the purpose of flexible walls. Sleeping is on futons made from organic linen and cotton. There is hardly any man-made or synthetic material in sight. The living space is in complete synchronicity with Nature.

So what happens to all the 'stuff' that we so diligently hold on to all our lives? If we look around our homes, we will find our drawers and shelves and wardrobes bursting with documents, letters, photos, albums, artifacts, memorabilia, unopened gifts, useless gizmos, obsolete gadgets, clothes and accessories, toiletries and cosmetics, shoes and bags..... Literally, the sky is the limit. We have a natural human tendency to hoard stuff like memories, never knowing when it might come in handy. Instead of discarding the old to bring in the new, we just expand our storage space hoping that like our minds, we would have infinite ability to hoard. We either have a penchant for collecting something, or a simple inability to discard and let go. My brother has piles of read and unread newspapers and magazines. My one sister holds on to any and all correspondence, another accumulates stuff discarded by others in the family, yet another has clippings from various published media and the last one hoards food items as if there will be a famine tomorrow! We refuse to let go of the past lest it might slip away and never return. But we forget, it has already slipped away. What we need in the present moment is all that we need to have. And that becomes the bare minimal. Minimalism comes in, clutter moves out.

I look at my life style in the present moment, and that tells me what exactly I need to live now. Everything else is superfluous and redundant. The past is gone and the future will take care of itself. It resonates perfectly with my philosophy of living in the present moment. I am constantly going through my drawers and shelves and wardrobes, and either discarding or giving away items I have not used for extended periods of time and unlikely to. All kinds of paperwork, documents, bills, reports etc. go through the shredder every month. Every time I buy a new kurta, an old one gets discarded. My kitchen and pantry hold the bare minimum supplies. I buy everything fresh and seasonal. No risk of spoilage or rotting and better nutrition with fresh food. I have a refrigerator but it is almost always empty, specially the freezer section. Nothing is frozen or preserved. In India there is a tendency to hold on to empty packaging material, old cartons, empty bottles and odd and sundry stuff. They all gather dust and cobwebs. In Zen, an empty bottle is not 'no mind', it is blocked energy. Out they go. Not surprisingly, even the digital world is not immune from the problems that arise by accumulating, both intentionally and inadvertently, and saving all kinds of data on our hard drives. Our computers are prone to crash more often, they slow down considerably, booting up seems to take forever and myriad other problems. There are various programs and maintenance routines available to regularly clean the hard drives and get rid of the unwanted.

When we can start discarding unnecessary physical clutter around us, it becomes a potent symbol for also discarding unnecessary relationships, habits, thoughts and ideas. In Ayurveda and naturopathy, regular cleansing through panchkarma, fasting and other detoxification methods is prescribed. This helps to restore the physical vitality. So also in the physical world around us. It is all related. When you see a clean, uncluttered, neat and tidy space around you, you immediately move into a comfort zone that allows you to breathe more freely and see more clearly. You feel refreshed and reenergized and lighter. A huge burden has come off your shoulders.