

CobaltSaffron

A FREE MONTHLY NEWSLETTER

Angle of perception

Did I ever tell you about that time I almost killed the master in the monastery I had the misfortune to have signed up for?

I had been in this isolated monastery for some months, after going through a big production to get there and get in. Besides the basic difficulties, I couldn't understand anything, no one talked to me, and I was completely ignored. The only real job I had was cleaning the wooden floor in the "dining room." And even there, the only contact I had with anyone was when someone would look in on me, giggle and walk out. They gave me a single rag to clean with, and after a couple weeks it was worn down to the size of a postcard with holes in it. There were no chairs anywhere, and my back was always aching and cramping. I spent most of my time thinking about everything that was wrong. My list of complaints was long, interesting and valid.

A rare visit with the master was arranged after days of multiple requests. Two monks led me in, and the guy was sitting in a fucking chair reading a magazine. He put the magazine down and said, not asked, "What." I told him I hadn't signed up to be a cleaning woman, I had sacrificed a lot of things to cross an ocean and spend time there. I was obviously serious about being in a monastery. It was appropriate that I receive at least some instruction or even a comment now and then, and besides, I needed a new rag.

At the moment I said that I needed a new rag, he began laughing so hard that he actually slipped out of the chair and fell on the floor. The two monks who had accompanied me tried to lift him off the floor, but to no avail. This went on for a good five minutes. I had laughed myself for the first minute, not because anything was funny, but the way you do when someone else is laughing well. By the fifth minute I was furious. Now and then he would glance up at me, and this made him laugh even harder. He was hacking and spitting up phlegm, snot was running out of his nose, and his face was hideously swollen and red.

Finally, a group of additional monks rushed in, picked him up and carried him out. I could still hear him laughing from across the courtyard, about 25 meters away. The two monks who stayed with me started yelling at me in Japanese, way too fast to understand.

The one who occasionally translated for me calmed down and explained that it was forbidden to make the master laugh, because once he started, he couldn't stop. He had already been in a hospital a number of times because of it, one time on medication to put him out. The risk of death by laughing was very serious and no joke.

That last comment got me going; it was the first time I ever really laughed completely out of control. "Death by laughing was no joke." The timing and nuances of all the details leading up to this revelatory statement were so absurd, yet somehow they had created this complete shift of perception in me. Months of agony were transformed in a single second. I understood that the master was laughing at the absurdity of my list of complaints, and I saw it all through his eyes. It *was* hilarious.

This event was the turning point in my experience of monastic life (and a lot of other things). Everyone else in the monastery began to respect me in obvious ways, and I learned how to uphold that respect. I learned how to hold my difficulties, not just with grace and humble acceptance, but in such a way that the difficulties actually transformed into something else. I'd remember the experience and start laughing, and someone would say something like, "You're trying to commit suicide, and don't think we won't laugh when you're dead." I'd bring my little wad of a rag into dinner and say, "No, I think I can get another day out of it." I started inventing original techniques for cleaning. And when I received a new rag, I was slightly disappointed.

"I learned how to hold my difficulties ... in such a way that [they] actually transformed into something else."

Looking back now, clearly, the master's reflex was a brilliant display of effortlessly utilizing my weapon—my list of complaints—to his advantage, and ultimately to my advantage. The impact of my list was reversed. The facts on the list were mainly right, but my answers because of them were off. *This is bad* became *this is good*. That transformation required only a leap of imagination to see the facts from a different angle of perception.

I've had to apply myself over the years to relearn this technique as my complaints have altered, and grown in size and number. It can be so tempting to just sit and pout in the little isolated monastery of favorite answers. Sometimes I have to provide the laughing hideous red face myself. Fortunately, I never run out of opportunities. And I continue to work on this, as, of course, my current list is really great.

Darrell Calkins

Due to the spring Retreat to the Source in France, the CobaltSaffron team has selected this previously written but unpublished letter for this month's issue.

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Comments

Thank you for your comments about the March issue of CobaltSaffron. Excerpts from a few we received:

“I really enjoyed this third newsletter. You did a wonderful job of gently yet powerfully pointing out that many of the spiritual stereotypes are not only arbitrary but also not the whole picture. That we get lost by thinking that the abstraction is the real thing. Really nice.”

S.C., Alaska.

“Great reply to a question that made me furious. Are people really asking these questions? The question strikes me as, ‘Don't you have real work to do, other than to bourgeoisly sit back and wonder about what the fuck spirituality really is?’ So much reflecting the VERY western mindset and lack of real engagement. Sorry, but had to get that off my chest. I am amazed at your patience.”

B.F., California.

“I have been enjoying the newsletters enormously. They are a generous source of connection to your work and I appreciate the effort behind it.”

M.A., California.

“In terms of passionate curiosity, there seems to be a fork in the road: one path pursues understanding and the other is consumed in knowing. The pat argument is that understanding leads to knowing but is that really true? Do our attempts at understanding really just make things worse? It seems like I have to choose even though I'm curious about both paths.”

J.M., California.

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We welcome questions, comments and complaints.

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