

The missing key!

ROB: The last time I attended a day with you I had a really strange experience. Right at the end of the day I asked you a question. I'd been wanting to ask it all day but I only got around to opening my mouth just as we were about to finish the last session. Anyway, I asked my question but then as soon as you began to respond to me you seemed to zoom across the room about thirty feet. You got really, really small and I couldn't hear what you were saying. I don't know why. I was really trying to pay attention to you, so I could "get what you're saying, but nothing registered with me. When you stopped speaking I had no idea what you had said. You said something and I know it was really important for me to hear it, otherwise I wouldn't have spaced out. I know I was rejecting what you had to offer. Something has happened and I should have known what it was. So I'm back because I want to hear what you've got to say.

JOAN: That was actually your perception was it, that Peter zoomed across the room and you couldn't hear anything?

ROB: Yes. I've never had an experience like that before. I was paying real close attention, I could see Peter's lips moving, but I couldn't hear anything.

[Silence]

ROB: So can you remember what you told me?

PETER: No, I'm sorry, I can't remember.

JOAN: I remember the interaction. I was sitting next to you. I remember that it was a very useful exchange.

PETER: How was it useful?

JOAN: I don't exactly recall. I remember that I found your response very insightful. It wrapped up a whole lot of things really neatly.

[Silence]

PETER: Can you remember anything about it?

JOAN: Not really.

ROB: I'd really like to listen to the tape of that session to hear what you said.

PETER: Why?

ROB: Because I know your response would be very helpful for me.

JOAN: Yes. I remember thinking at the time that what you said, was exactly what Rob needed to hear.

PETER: Really.

JOAN: Yes. In fact, I remember thinking that it would be great if all seekers could hear what you were saying.

PETER: So, what was it that I said? Do you have any idea?

JOAN: Not really. It was something about fixations.

PETER: But that's basically all I talk about.

[Group laughter]

JOAN: Yes, but there was something particularly important in what you said. Something I hadn't heard before.

[Silence]

ROB: So what can we do?

JOAN: Can you remember what your question was?

ROB: I wanted to know what happens when we reach the end of the path. Part of what holds me back is a fear that if I become liberated, then because there will be no desire, I won't be able to take care of my needs.

JOAN: Right. And Peter described how it is possible to reach the end of the path and still do all the things we need to do in the world, like take care of our families.

PETER: Really! I did that - in just one or two sentences!

[Group laughter]

JOAN: Yes. I don't know if it's "what" you said, or the space you created.

PETER: What would you say is happening here?

[Long silence]

PETER: Are you fulfilled in this moment, or is something missing?

JOAN: Something is missing. We are trying to work out how we can fulfill the demands of living in the world, if we are in a state of total equanimity.

ROB: You said something that shows that this is possible. I didn't get it last time, and others seem to have forgotten, so we are just trying to recover what you said.

[Silence]

PETER: So let's say you were able to reconstruct what I said. Then what?

JOAN: Then we would understand that an absence of desire won't incapacitate us at all.

Jacob: Then we can just go straight for it, because we'll see that our fears are ungrounded.

PETER: Really. You think that if we can get back to that experience from a month ago it would really clarify things.

JOAN: Sure. A lot of things will fall into place.

PETER: I see what you are saying. If we really "grok" that liberation is a state of empowerment, then we can take all stops out, and as you said, just go for it.

[Long silence]

PETER: How would you describe what's generally happening over these last few minutes?

TONI: We are creating something to do.

PETER: Certainly we are giving ourselves a project-something to keep us busy and entertained. More precisely, though, some of you have been constructing and energizing a discourse that there is a "missing key", a "missing link" in your experience of spirituality, and that if you can find the missing key, then everything will be smooth sailing. You will no longer need to be weighed down by your fears and anxieties. Before long, liberation will be looming on the horizon! This is the nature of a "missing key." We impute that the missing key will solve all, or most, of our problems. In fact, the missing key is all we need. If we could get that insight and really let it permeate through our systems, then we would have a renewed confidence to step boldly forward on the spiritual path. In this case the key is a particular experience that seems to have happened a month ago, but of course, the key can be anything. It can be a practice, a book, a conversation, an astrological or I Ching reading, a teacher, a pith instruction, a therapist, or a relationship. Also, in the particular discourse being developed here, some of you actually had the key. Even though it vaporized at some point, the belief that someone actually held the key, validates and energizes our search. All we have to do now is relocate it. We can enjoy the search, "knowing" that there is a key, much like children looking for treasures that their parents have hidden.

But this is only one way of relating to the idea of a "missing key." Sometimes, when we discover the key we prefer just to hold onto it. Sometimes we dare not use it, in case it doesn't work. People often relate to spiritual practices in this way. We learn a practice from a book or teacher and then put it aside for when we will really need it. We may not even test it out, or familiarize ourselves with its use. Instead we keep it well labeled in the back of our minds. We like to live in the illusion that when every other option fails, we can pull out a technique that will heal us from a serious

illness, or guide us safely through the bardo.

Of course, at other times we just can't wait to use our new key to unlock the door to liberation. But when we actually put our new insight or technique to the test, anything can happen. Perhaps we carefully insert the key in the lock, gently turn it, and nothing happens. The door just stays locked, and our life just drags along as it always has. Or the door might open revealing a wonderful, blissful, light-filled panorama, that slowly evaporates before our eyes. Or the door might open revealing all our shit! Anything can happen when we invest a lot of hope and effort in searching for the key to happiness and fulfillment.

The idea of a missing key can stimulate all sorts of emotions, from exasperation and depression through to manic excitement. I'm sure you can recognize the enthusiasm that was building up in here a few minutes ago. You can also appreciate how our construction of a "missing key" is a metaphor for how we relate to the spiritual path more generally. Depending on how we relate to the notion, it can express our hope for an easy solution to the problem of suffering, or the fear that we might have embarked on an endless search for an ever-retreating goal.

Also, I just want to clarify that I'm not putting down what has been happening. I'm not in any sense wanting to make anyone feel silly for getting caught up in a wonderful possibility, because we all do that. Nor am I suggesting that we shouldn't get caught up in fantasies about finding the trick or key that will solve our problems, because we will continue to do this, again and again. Right now, though, we can see some of the dynamics of that energy, and appreciate its consequences in terms of creating excitement and disappointment.

[Silence]

ROB: I'm noticing that I'm still wondering about that experience from last time. It still seems to mean something that I spaced out. I'd still like to know what it was that you said.

PETER: Rob, do you think there is something I could say-just a sentence or two-that would fundamentally clarify the spiritual path for you?

ROB: I don't know. Perhaps.

PETER: Do you think I could say something right now that would displace all your self-doubt and uncertainty?

ROB: Possibly. I've read many stories about teachers who have awakened their students just through saying one or two words.

PETER: What would you say is happening now?

ROB: I'm just saying that historically many people have been awakened through the skill of their teachers. Sometimes their teachers didn't even have to say anything. They just looked at them in a particular way, or drew their attention to the moon in the sky, or something like that.

PETER: What are you doing?

[Silence]

ROB: I see. I'm beginning to build up a story that if I hang out with teachers for long enough they might zap me. I'm creating another key.

[Long silence]

PETER: I just want to clarify that I'm not rejecting that there are people, books, teachings, practices and so on, that can help open up a more spacious way of being. Clearly, there are. I'm also not rejecting that teachers can, on occasions, open people up through very minimalist interventions if a person is poised for such a breakthrough. This does happen. But it is also very easy for us to be sidetracked through some fantasy that there is a technique, book, insight or glance that will "do the trick" once and forever.

*If you are interested in the **Radiant Mind Course**, a **Free Audio CD** interview is available of Peter being asked about the Course, what the unconditioned mind is and how people can tell if they are experiencing nondual awareness.*

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