

The Paradox of Practice

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"You know, there's really only one paradox. Here you have man trying to upgrade himself, when actually he already is, and it's trying to manifest." - Robert Nadeau sensei



This quote from Nadeau is a perfect description of the paradox of practice, inherent in the worldview that informs ITP. Why struggle to upgrade yourself, when you already are what you are trying so hard to be? To paraphrase Zen master Richard Baker roshi's answer, you are perfect just the way you are, but there is still room for improvement. ITP co-founders Michael Murphy and George Leonard, offer another way of explaining this in their book *The Life We Are Given*, writing that the "...infinite possibilities of the Divine Spirit were involved in the universe from the very beginning. Evolution is the process through which these hidden possibilities are revealed." At the core essence of our being, we are the Divine manifesting itself through our potential.

The perfection described above may well refer to the perfection of our spirit, a recognition of the great gifts involved in us since the creation of the universe, our divine nature. It could also refer to the truth put forward by the Buddhist tradition, that we all have Buddha nature. In this sense, we are all already enlightened, or awake, and at the same time we can envision and experience positive growth.

Practice helps us to wake up, or to become "accident prone for enlightenment," as Baker roshi would say, giving us a way to

manifest what already lies within. Because we are much more than the small ego-centered self that we normally experience ourselves to be, we may not need an upgrade at all, rather create a shift in focus by picturing a transformed state, or as George Leonard would offer, a change of context.

This urge to manifest may come from the evolutionary urge to self-surpass. Here is another paradox in the form of a question: Is what lies within already complete and just waiting for the right time to manifest, or are life circumstances partly dictating how our growth appears? This is reminiscent of the old nature versus nurture question that parents ask endlessly. It seems to be both. What is within meets what is without and something new is born into the world. In ITP, we understand this question in relation to the paradox of focus and surrender. As Michael and George write; "Grace seems freely given, involving surrender more than struggle. At the same time, dedicated, long-term practice seems to predispose us to its gifts."

The theme of being and becoming doesn't have to be characterized as opposites. Rather, they can be seen as complements, like the Vedic story of the two birds sitting on the branch of a tree, one enjoys the sweet fruits of

life while the other stands apart, symbolizing the immanent and the transcendent aspects of our existence, the mutual relationship of the finite and the infinite self. Like them, we are two – one part experiencing the world, learning and growing, and one standing apart, witnessing and enriched by the experience. Our individual development as practitioners aims to cultivate our divine awakening and share it with the world, ultimately affecting the world's advance. Each practitioner and each person's potential is essential to the whole. We are individuals contributing to the fabric of the collective.

As the divine wakes up in us through our practice, we experience the urge to grow, to consciously unfold towards a greater life that we sense is there waiting for us. In our essence we are perfect. And in our humanity, we are perfect as well - a perfect expression of the unique being that we are. At the same time, there is room for growth, a fuller flowering of our gifts and our human possibilities.