

One Stuck Thing Is Never One Thing

On why a blockage you have already released keeps coming back — and why that is evidence the work is going deeper, not failing.

Someone asked me a question this week that I have been asked, in one form or another, for thirty years. I have been practicing for a few years. It is working. And some of my blockages keep coming back. What am I doing wrong?

The short answer is: nothing. But the short answer is not much help, because it does not touch the part that actually hurts, which is not the blockage. It is the return of the blockage. The first time a hard thing shows up you can be brave about it. The fifth time it shows up you start to build a theory about yourself. The theory is usually that you are broken, or that the practice is decorative, or that you were never really doing it right in the first place.

“ Stuff can really stay in there for quite a while, but generally it's a lot of things that are moving out under the sense of one thing — under the feeling of one thing being stuck.

TIM O. DAVIS · FRIDAY TEACHING CALL

I want to argue with that theory, because I have held it and it cost me years.

Here is what I have actually watched happen, in myself and in a lot of other people. You get a feeling of one thing being stuck. One relationship. One conversation you cannot let go of. One recurring flare that arrives at the same hour on the same kind of day. It presents as a single object. It feels like one stone in one shoe, and so it seems reasonable to expect that one good act of letting go should remove it.

But it was never one thing. What is moving out under that single feeling is a whole stack of older material — things you have no memory of storing, laid down at ages you cannot reach by thinking. The current situation is the doorway. It is not the contents. So you release, and something genuinely leaves, and then the next layer arrives at the same door, wearing the same face. And because it arrives wearing the same face, you conclude nothing happened.

This changes what you should expect. If you thought you were removing an object, its return is failure. If you understand you are draining a reservoir through one small opening, its return is just Tuesday. Same door. Different water.

Try the honest test instead of the emotional one. Do not ask whether the pattern came back. Ask how long it held you this time. Ask how fast you noticed. Ask whether you needed three

days to come back to yourself or twenty minutes. Ask whether you had to be alone in a dark room, or whether you managed it in the car. Those numbers move, and they move steadily, and they are the only honest measurement available to you. The presence or absence of the trigger tells you almost nothing — that is largely up to the world.

There is another reason it feels like nothing is working, and it is worth naming plainly. Deeper layers are not more pleasant than shallow ones. They are less pleasant. So the sensation of your practice succeeding and the sensation of your practice failing are, from the inside, nearly identical. Both feel like more difficulty than you expected. This is exactly where most people quit, and they quit at the moment they are getting somewhere, which is the cruelest joke in this whole business.

At the temple we had a word for this. We called it a cleansing. It was not a euphemism and it was not positive thinking. It was a way of holding the experience that let you stay in it. Something is running through your internal system like a scrubber, and it is rough. Sometimes it is really rough. But a scrubber going through is not the same event as a machine breaking down, and if you cannot tell those two events apart you will pull the plug every single time.

So when the old thing shows up again, try this. Do not brace and do not fix. Look at it with curiosity for a minute, the way you would look at weather. Notice where it sits in your body. Notice that it is energy, moving, and that energy that is moving is by definition on its way out. Then get on with your day while it finishes.

One more thing, because the mind will try to make this a project. You do not have to understand it. You will not, at first. It is genuinely difficult to see clearly where you are stuck while you are inside the stuckness — you can name the surface of it, the job or the person or the argument, and the surface is the least important part. Understanding tends to arrive after the release, not before it, which is inconvenient for those of us who would prefer to think our way out.

The thing that keeps coming back is not a verdict on you. It is the shape of the opening you have made. And if the same door keeps getting used, that means the door is working.

Quote lightly cleaned for punctuation only.

THE PRACTICE

Progress is not measured by whether an old pattern reappears. It is measured by how you relate to it when it does.