

Recalling The Slogans

Spend enough time around the rooms of recovery and we notice there is a culture and vocabulary all its own. We can't go a day without hearing years of hard-won experience compressed into slogans like Easy Does It, This Too Shall Pass, and One Day At A Time. There is real wisdom behind each of these phrases, but their power comes in part from their simplicity. Our recovering minds need simplicity, and though the slogans can seem trite on repetition, their power comes to fruition when we actually need to remember what they carry. What seems obvious and clichéd can be indispensable in the moment, and that is something worth investigating.

Slogans like these are compressed truths, almost mantras, true enough and useful enough that they took hold and got passed along, person to person, through the rooms. The triteness isn't a flaw. It is what a useful truth looks like after it has been polished by thousands of people needing it and finding it helped. But this compression has a cost. The words become so familiar that we stop feeling what is behind them. We recite instead of contemplate. They become automatic sounds we make instead of a truth we examine.

Buddhism has a practice for exactly this shape of experience: recollection, where we take a truth we think we already know and look at it deliberately until it becomes real again, with new understanding emerging along the way. There are five standard remembrances, and it is best to just state them plainly:

I am of the nature to grow old. There is no way to escape growing old.

I am of the nature to have ill health. There is no way to escape having ill health.

I am of the nature to die. There is no way to escape death.

All that is dear to me, and everyone I love, is of the nature to change. There is no way to escape being separated from them.

My deeds are my closest companions. I am the beneficiary of my deeds. My deeds are the ground on which I stand.

These hit a little harder than the slogans we may be used to. They are more direct. Where "this too shall pass" stays gentle, the remembrances name exactly what is passing, the parts we might not want to look at, the parts that might hurt. So why

look here at all? The tradition offers a reason for each. The first three are direct counters to the intoxication of youth, of health, of being alive. The word intoxication is not an accident, and our own history with addiction helps us see the connection clearly. We know this in our bones. These remembrances are a sobering in the most literal sense, a clearing of the drunkenness of assuming we will always have time.

Facing these facts does not shrink life. It sharpens it. The fourth remembrance is perhaps the hardest of the five, harder than our own aging or death, because it names the loss of everyone and everything we love. For many of us this is not distant. We have lost people. Some of us have been the reason others grieved. The remembrance does not ask us to be at peace with that. It asks only that we not look away from it, that we hold, honestly, the fact that everything dear to us is on loan. And strangely, that is where its gift is hidden. If we stop assuming infinite time, this ordinary day becomes visible as the finite, precious day it actually is.

The fifth remembrance lands a little differently. After three intoxications and the certainty of loss, it turns and points at the one thing we can. Our deeds, what we do, right now, with the time we have, remain ours. We are not helpless in the face of everything we cannot control. And notice it is not phrased as a commandment or a threat. It is the antidote to heedlessness, a reminder that even in a life bounded by so much we cannot change, our conduct remains our own. This is the same wisdom the Serenity Prayer carries, approached from a different direction. It names the unchangeable parts plainly, and then the one part that is ours to act on.

These remembrances are not facts to frighten us. They are the shape of a real life, honestly seen. The slogans were never trite. We just stopped looking at them. Recollection is the practice of picking one back up and holding it until it is true again. One day at a time. Grant me the serenity. I am of the nature to die. And the one thing that is always still ours: what we do with the day we actually have.