

Perfect Your Love

We are not perfect beings. We all have failings and make mistakes. Some bring regret, shame or guilt and hopefully also bring learning and change. We do what we can to make amends, to redress things and in the end, to forgive ourselves as well as others. Self-forgiveness is an act of love and compassion, just as it is to forgive others. Yet self-forgiveness is complete only with a resolve to never repeat that conduct again, even when tempted, even when we think we can get away with it and no one else will ever know; even when we are tired and depleted and needy. Never again, in our most unfeeling or driven moment, to just career ahead, unaware, with the suspect action.

The temptation itself is like a signpost that points to an underlying defense and beneath that, a need. Like the talented man who came to me, driven to prove himself worthy to the point of deception. Now he had been found out. Looking back, everything he did when he was young was found lacking and criticized by stoic parents. In his adult mind all he did was still lacking and he was blind to his innate talents. Striving for perfectionism escalated into deceiving others, but like other defenses, was also a form of self-deception justified by an entitlement attitude. Perfection, by definition, can't be achieved and the relentless pursuit to produce it can't be fulfilling. Still, the underlying need can be honed and attended to through personal investigation and inner-work.

Inner-work and contemplating your actions, referred to as “mindful practice” or just “practice”, is not a mission to become an ideal human being. On reading a book by esteemed Buddhist teacher, Dr Jack Kornfield, I came across this line in the text. Being a lapsed perfectionist, it stood out for me:

“The point of dharma practice isn't to perfect yourself. It's to perfect your love”.

How beautiful and simple are these words? Perfect your love. If only to remember them at the most crucial times. To have the presence of mind to look through the lens of “*perfecting your love*” bypasses the ego traps of defenses and goes to the heart of illumination in a clear and profound way. Strangely, it also shed light on some interwoven strands of my life.

To explore the link with defenses, an example from my own personal life story illustrates the notion of inner-work and “honing in”, although too long to tell here, and demonstrates getting to the bottom of a defense to uncover the underlying need. It takes a steadfast approach over time and sometimes, just when you feel you’ve had enough and don’t ever want to deal with it again – voila! That is your magical time of resolution when mind, body and soul completely converge and rise up . . . or deepen, as the experience may take you, and take you it will when you are ready. These are two distinct and profound experiences of rising or falling and both psychospiritual journeys leading to a unique, individual expression of love.

—Extract from *Standing in the Fire: a companion book for facing the loss of a loved one and life without them.*

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