

Working with Resistance

Lately, I've been learning a lot about resistance. My cat, Leo, has an infection, so every day he has to take an antibiotic pill. Cats are picky about what they put in their mouths, and Leo hates the taste of the pills. When he sees one coming, he closes his mouth into a tight slit, and extends his claws in fighting position. Even after we've managed to get the pill in his mouth, he'll often hide it in his cheek, and then spit it out.

Leo's daily fight with the pills has begun to seem like a metaphor for all the ways we resist life-- not just life's pills, but also life's sweetness. It's not just that we resist facing, say, a difficult health issue, or the need to leave a relationship or a job. We've also been known to resist a new opportunity, a new friend or lover, an emerging state of inner expansion, even when we sense that something good could happen if we opened up to it. We resist creating space in our overscheduled lives. We resist our own intuitive understandings, and also the inward pull into meditation--often out of an unexamined fear of what we might find if we let ourselves move into our inner spaces. Especially, I've noticed, we resist letting go of our limitations--real or imagined--and stepping into our own largeness, our greater self.

Admittedly, there are times when resistance is an appropriate; if we didn't have the ability to say "No," to resist or filter some of what comes at us, we'd all be overloaded and overwhelmed. The body's immune system is built precisely for this purpose: to resist outside invaders in the form of bugs and bacteria. So is our psychological immune system, which by the time we're grown-up usually consists of a series of energetic boundaries and gateways that we've built to keep out invasive or hostile energies, potentially toxic situations and painful relationships. Obviously, if we didn't have that network of resistances, we'd be vulnerable to every form of suggestion or coercion, subtle and obvious.

The problem arises when we don't know when or how to let down the boundaries. Then our resistance stops being a useful filtering device, and becomes armor. Every one of us has some calcified resistance, and for some of us, resistance can become a rigid of energetic barrier that closes us off from change, from new ideas, from intimacy with people and situations that could take us deeper into our own truth. That's when we stagnate. And we can stagnate in any area of life--in our work, in our relationships, or in our spiritual practice.

What Are You Resisting?

So when I notice myself feeling constricted, or stagnant, or stuck--all words for the same phenomenon-- I usually begin by asking myself what it is that I'm currently resisting. If you try this yourself, you'll probably find that you know the answer. We usually know what we're resisting--often some necessary change, a shift in the nutrition you're giving yourself, a part of your body or psyche that is begging to be stretched.

Once you've determined where the resistance is lodging, you can start to work with it. The classic approach to resistance is to breathe into the feeling and say, on the out breath, "Let go!" However, for me, this doesn't work unless I've first spent some time actually listening to the resistance, getting to know it. The best way to do this is by asking questions and letting resistance 'talk' to me.

Dialoguing with Your Resistance

The idea of dialoguing with your resistance might sound slightly weird; nonetheless, you might like to try it.

Think about something in your life that you sense would be good for you, but that you're resisting. It might be a change of some kind, or perhaps a shift in diet or in your personal practice, or perhaps in your attitude towards your family life, your relationship (s), or yourself.

Once you've noticed the resistance, let yourself feel the actual sensation of resisting. What are you resisting? What does the resistance feel like in your body?

Once you've touched into the feeling-space of resistance, ask, "What do you have to tell me? What is this resistance about? Why are you there?"

Ask the question, and then just wait to see what arises. It may be a feeling, or a thought, a belief or a fear. It might be a practical sense that maybe now is not the time, or a desire to make the change more familiar before you give into it.

Keep asking until you feel that you've sensed as much about the resistance as possible. Feel that you are actually listening to your resistance.

Then ask, "What would happen if I let go?" Notice what arises. Then ask your resistance, "Would you be willing to let go--just for a moment?" As you ask this question, notice what arises in the wake of the question. There should be a sense of ease, relaxation, perhaps small, perhaps greater than you thought possible.

I've found that as I become present to my resistance in this way, with this questioning attitude, something always does let go. Resistance eases. Sometimes, I also discover that the resistance comes from a deeper intuition that something that seems desirable isn't quite right. But I'd never have found this out if I hadn't asked. Just as people want to be heard, so do our psychological states. Sometimes it's enough just to be willing to listen to what our resistance wants to tell us. That might be all it takes for resistance to be willing to let go.

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