



Practice Over Parables, by Jason Garner

A Zen teacher once told me something interesting. We were meditating together at my home when my dog began to bark. He sensed my agitation and said in his rich Tasmanian accent, “Don’t be snobbish about sounds. They’re all just sounds.” Those words have stuck with me.

We tend to get very picky about noise in meditation. We consider particular music, or chimes, or chants, “beautiful,” while the noises of everyday life are a “distraction.” It’s like another teacher told me once as he instructed me to open my eyes during meditation: “We exclude so much of life when we close our eyes.”

That tends to be a major theme for most of us in spirituality “trying to use spiritual practice or beliefs to exclude the parts of our lives we see as bad. In fact, if we’re honest, a desire to tune out all the stuff we don’t like is usually the motivator for tuning into spirituality in the first place. I learned to meditate for that reason. I wanted to be like the images I’d seen in movies where the blissful monk floats above the issues of the world seemingly oblivious to anything but the angels strumming a golden harp on his shoulder. It’s what I imagined I’d find at the Shaolin Temple until I got there and found monks with iPhones had the same hopes and dreams and fears as the rest of us. They just practiced skills to navigate it all.

There are lots of stories in the spiritual world about gurus with special powers. Most of my teachers were students of those gurus and many have amazing tales of what they witnessed at the feet of their teachers “miracles we might call them. I like those stories and I tend to believe most of them. But I also chose long ago not to make that the basis for my practice. I never wanted a fantastic story or magical belief as the foundation for my spirituality. It’s just too easy for it all to fall apart that way “with a scandal or exposé or a bucketful of cold reality. I chose instead to find teachers who I identify with as people and who live life in a skillful way that I wanted to emulate. In short, I chose practice over parables.