

It began on last Saturday, eight days ago. I had just walked into my upstairs dharma room to begin my morning practice. I lit candles, and was starting to light incense, when I heard a faint, “drip...drip...drip”, coming from the direction of the window. I walked to the window, and looking up saw beads of water gathering along the upper sill. They grew in size, getting larger and larger, until they fell down through the venetian blinds, over the bottom sill and splattered onto the wooden floor.

I felt my stomach sink. I knew what it meant. It’s been a cold winter, and the ice that’s been building up on the eaves of our house was forcing its way under the roof shingles. Melted by the warmth of the house it was now dripping down the insides of our walls, into the insulation, through our windows and on to the floor.

A quick check of the den downstairs ceiling confirmed more of the same problem. Looking up, I saw a sepia-colored stain in the center of the ceiling with a palm-sized bulge in the middle of it. I got a stool and a plastic bucket. I poked the bulge with the blade of my pocket knife. A thin stream of water flowed from the hole that I made and fell into the bucket. After a while, the stream stopped and settled into a steady “drip...drip...drip”.

That was eight days ago. Since last Saturday, the ceiling over the den has been torn down. An entire wall of the dharma room and has been pulled off. Another wall in a second upstairs bedroom has also been removed, as well as large sections of a bathroom and the dining room. Plastic sheeting covers everything; and the whole house reverberates with noise as three upstairs rooms and two downstairs now have industrial dehumidifiers and fans running twenty-four hours a day. And this is just the beginning...

My first reaction to this was disbelief - “No. This just can’t be happening!” Then anger - “Dammit! This isn’t fair! Why does this have to happen to me?” Next, strong feelings of attachment arose as I began to think of all that my wife and I had invested in our home and of the things that were now being ruined – our things...my things! I thought of all that would have to be done to put things right, and my head began to spin. I wanted it all to go away. How were we going to function with all of this noise and almost every room torn up? How was I going to do my practice? I wanted everything to return to the way that it had been, the way that I wanted it to be. It was simple: the way things are now - bad. The way things used to be - good. And I want to feel good.

As the morning wore on though, the initial shock of what had happened slowly began to wear off. Increasingly, I started to become more aware of what I was actually feeling, and I began to name those feelings: anger (sure), attachment to things (yes), my own ego (uh, huh), fear of the unknown (true), and perhaps in particular, difficulty just being present with what was happening without judging it (this is good, this is bad, etc.)

Now, to deny any of these feelings would have been impossible. And to try to act as if I was “OK” with all that happened would have been equally silly. Instead, I tried hard to look at this situation simply for what it was. That situation was that water was dripping into the house. And yes, it was making a mess, and yes, our lives were going to be inconvenienced for a time. That was pretty much it. With that awareness of the present, it became easier for me to be more mindful of my emotions regarding the situation. I could watch my feelings ebb and flow again and again. I could say, “I feel angry now”, but not be the anger. I could see the anger rise and I could see it depart. I could look at the ruined wall in the dharma room and say, “I feel sadness now” but not be the sadness. By being present and by mindfully observing, I really was able to reduce my suffering.

So, this is to be my practice – this mess, and this noise...just this, just here, just now. True, for some time, I won’t be able to practice the way I used to, in my quiet dharma room with lit candles and the scent of incense. But my trying to hold on to that would have been a mistake, and just another form of attachment. So, during the day now, I do informal practice. I often chant the Morning Prayer, the Great Compassionate Dharani, and the Heart Sutra. And also during the day, amid the plastic sheeting, the dripping and the hum of the dehumidifiers, I do my hwadu - three slow and mindful breaths - no more than three breaths, and no less, just being present with what is. My practice is this moment, whatever that moment may look like, for how could it be anything else?

