

The Great Way Has No Preferences

The 3rd-century Zen master Sengcan wrote, “The Great Way is not difficult for those not attached to preferences.” I love that translation, because it lands in plain language we can all feel: life gets heavy when we’re stuck in constant judgment—when we spend our days labeling every moment as good or bad, pleasant or unpleasant, just because it lines up with what we hoped for. Sengcan is pointing at something simple yet profound: suffering isn’t caused by the world itself, it’s caused by our insistence that the world behave according to our script.

Think about how often we wake up already grasping. We want our spouse to say the right thing, our kids to act just so, our work to feel meaningful and manageable, our bodies to cooperate, even the traffic lights to turn green when we approach. And when life doesn’t line up with these preferences, we feel cheated or resentful. I know in my own life, some of my most tormented days have been fueled not by what was happening, but by my resistance to what was happening. The energy drain is enormous.

This teaching isn’t asking us to stop wanting things altogether. It’s not about becoming passive, numb, or detached. It’s about loosening our grip where we can. It’s about learning to notice when we’re turning preferences into demands—when “I’d like it to be this way” hardens into “It must be this way or else I can’t be okay.” That shift is where tension, frustration, and despair really take root.

Radical acceptance is the alternative. And by acceptance, I don’t mean resignation. It doesn’t mean we stop pursuing change, growth, or justice. It means we stop fighting the present moment. We allow reality to be as it is, and then we choose how to meet it. That’s a completely different posture than grinding our teeth against reality until it bends. When I coach people through this, I often see their shoulders drop as they realize “I don’t need to be at war with reality.”

We experience life differently practice loosening. Imagine catching yourself mid-spiral: the “shoulds” are running wild, your chest is tight, your jaw is clenched. In that moment, you take a breath, notice the *story* you’re clinging to, and let it open a little. Maybe you even pray, or remind yourself, “I can meet this as it is.” What happens then? Usually, the grip softens. The moment becomes more spacious. You feel less like a victim of circumstance and more like a participant in something bigger than your preferences.

The truth is that preferences will always arise. We’re human. But they don’t have to get so hung up on them. We can acknowledge them, even act on them when it makes sense, without being enslaved by them. And in doing so, we step into a kind of peace that doesn’t depend on everything going our way.

Reflection questions:

- Where in your life right now are you most resisting reality as it is?
- What happens in your body when you imagine loosening your grip, even slightly, on how you think it should be?
- How might your relationships, your work, or your inner world shift if you trusted that you could meet life as it comes without needing it to conform to your preferences?