

A Life in Harmony with Impermanence

This Life, Which is Wonderful and Evanescent

-Blanche Hartman (Zen Tradition)

“One of the Buddha’s most significant teachings is impermanence. But actually that is just how things are—anything, anytime, anywhere. To live in harmony with this truth brings great happiness.”

If you think about it, it’s awesomely, amazingly wonderful just to be alive! It’s a wonderful gift, and especially on a beautiful spring day like today. But it took me several years of meditation practice and a heart attack before I really got it that just to be alive is awesome. As I was walking out of the hospital I thought, “Wow! I could be dead. The rest of my life is just a gift.” And then I thought, “Well, it always has been a gift from the very beginning and I never noticed it until it was almost gone.”

I think it is true of many of us that we don’t notice what a gift it is just to be alive. How could we not notice? Well, we sort of take it for granted. But this gift is not without its problems. One of these problems is actually the very thing that made me realize how awesome life is, what a gift it is and how much I appreciate it. That is the fact that life is evanescent, impermanent. It is precious because we can’t just take it for granted. When we realize this, we may wonder, “Well, if my life is a gift, how shall I use it, how shall I give it back, how shall I express my appreciation for it, and completely live this life which is wonderful and evanescent?”

In Zen Mind, Beginner’s Mind, Suzuki Roshi tells the story of the four horses. One of the horses starts to run just seeing the shadow of the whip, before it even touches him. The next one starts to run just having the whip touch the hair of its skin. The third horse starts to run when it really feels the pain of the whip on its skin.

And the fourth horse doesn’t really get going until it feels the whip in the marrow of its bones.

I came to practice the first time I almost died. The second time I almost died, I really came to recognize what a joy it is to be alive.

What is this whip? This whip is just that evanescence of life, the quality of being fleeting or vanishing quickly, the teaching of impermanence. One of the Buddha’s most significant teachings is to hold up impermanence for us to see, but actually it is just how things are—anything, anytime, anywhere. To live in harmony with this truth brings great happiness.

There is a Pali chant which expresses this:

All things are impermanent
They arise and they pass away.
To live in harmony with this truth
Brings great happiness.

If you see how things are, “things as-it-is” as Suzuki-roshi used to say, you see that they arise and they pass away. The trick is to live in harmony with the way things actually are. Our suffering comes from resisting the natural flow of the impermanence of all phenomena.

I came to Buddhist practice the first time I almost died. The second time I almost died, I really came to recognize what a joy it is to be alive.

Maybe my experience like the fourth horse. I didn’t get it until it really got to the marrow. But maybe it’s not so bad to be the fourth horse because when it gets to the marrow, you’ve got it through and through. You don’t think, “Well, maybe just some things are impermanent, maybe, but not me. Maybe I’ll live forever, or maybe whatever I love will live for ever, or maybe impermanence is not really the truth.”

So we may try to bargain with impermanence or get into denial about it. But somehow, if we're lucky, we do come to understand things as they are and that this is actually the experience we are living. Then the question of how we live it becomes really urgent for us. It's not going to last forever; I just have a limited amount of time to live in a way that feels satisfying to me, that feels right, that feels in consonance with the way things are. "To live in harmony with this truth brings great happiness," the Pali chant says.

When I first came to Zen Center I heard Suzuki-roshi say, "Just to be alive is enough." That went right past me and it may be going right past you. I just put it out there so you can take a look at it and decide what it means to you. But I do think that we become curious about Zen practice or any kind of religious discipline when we begin to run into some of the difficulties of life. The question of how to live with those difficulties becomes a direct issue for us. Or we may notice that how we are living doesn't feel quite right. Or that the familiar fixed ideas we have don't seem to hold up on closer examination.

A chant we often do in Zen practice says:

*An unsurpassed, penetrating and perfect dharma
Is rarely met with even in a hundred thousand million
kalpas.
Having it to see and listen to, to remember and
accept,
I vow to taste the truth of the Tathagatha's (Buddha's)
words.*

Notice that it doesn't say that an unsurpassed, penetrating and perfect dharma is rare. That is just the truth of things as they are. It is always in front of you every moment of your life. It is right here, nowhere else.

The chant ends, "I vow to taste the truth of the Tathagatha's words." This is a vow to taste the truth of how things really are, a vow to see directly. Taste

is a very intimate sense—you get it right on your tongue, begin to digest it, right here in your body. That is what my heart attack did for me; I got it right up close and personal. And each of us has some experience in our own life where the way things are is tasted directly, personally, right here. And that changes our life. We look at our life and we say, "This life is not in harmony with the way things are. That's why I'm always uncomfortable. So how do I bring myself into harmony with the actuality of this life?"

The Zen teacher Kobun Chino once said in a sesshin talk that when you realize how precious your life is, and know it is completely your responsibility how you manifest it and how you live it—it is such a big responsibility that:

"such a person just sits down for a while"!

Well, just sitting doesn't mean merely sitting. It means completely sitting; not doing anything else, just sitting. You may have noticed that when you sit down intending to just sit, there is a lot going on! We don't really notice how active our mind is until we sit still with the intention of not deliberately thinking. Even though we are not deliberately thinking, a lot of thinking is going on! I had no idea how completely, incessantly busily active my mind was until I sat down with the intention of just being still and just being quiet and not grasping the thoughts that came along.

So one of the reasons we need instruction in how to just sit is that we need to know what might support us in letting some of that busyness just go along, without grabbing on to it. Something like paying attention to posture and paying attention to breath. Paying attention to what's happening right here and right now, which is this physical body, whatever sensations there might be, and breathing.

Most of the stuff that is going on in our mind is not about what is happening right here and right now. Check it out sometime and see: most of the stuff that

is going on in your mind is either chasing after the past or chasing after the future. Or worrying about the future and regretting or chewing over the past incessantly. And figuring out who to blame for all our difficulties. It takes a long time to realize that there is no one to blame and to be willing just to be here.

I was invited recently to participate in a spirituality discussion group. My friend said the group was going to be giving attention to what we do in situations where there has been some real loss, where things are never going to be the same again. Someone you know and love has died; you have had a serious illness or an accident. Something has occurred that feels like a terrible loss that can't be recovered. How do you work with those circumstances?

Some of the people there had experienced losses which they could relate to the question, but the discussion was really about how our lives were going now and about how to arrive at a sense of ease or a feeling of composure in our lives. One person said, "Things are going pretty well for me now, but I just noticed today that even though everything is fine I have this kind of worried uneasiness, not about anything in particular, and it seems strange when everything is going fine."

The teaching that there is suffering in the midst of joy was right there in what he was saying—the worried uneasiness that although everything is fine now, something might happen and it won't be fine. Have any of you ever had that kind of experience? It is a very common human experience.

Many of us just don't notice or forget what a gift and how mysterious it is just to be alive.

We have all kinds of ways of imagining the future that distract us from actually living in the present. What just sitting, what zazen is really about, is living in the present so that we can actually manifest this precious life in a way that feels right, a way that is consonant

with our inner understanding of the dharma, of the truth. Shortly before he died, William Butler Yeats said,

"If I had to put it in a single phrase, I would say that one can live the truth but one can really not know the truth, and I must express the truth with the remainder of my life."

I can live the truth but cannot know it, and I must express it with the remainder of my life.

Dogen Zenji, the Japanese founder of this particular stream of Zen, said this about the precept "I vow not to disparage the Three Treasures (Buddha, Dharma, Sangha)":

"To expound the dharma with this body is foremost. Its virtue returns to the ocean of reality. It is unfathomable. We just accept it with respect and gratitude."

It is unfathomable. We cannot know it. The inconceivable really is inconceivable! But we still try to find a way to grab onto it.

In his lecture in the San Francisco Zen Center's "Buddhism at the Millennium's Edge" series, Stephen Batchelor was talking about a willingness to live in perplexity, a willingness to live in the realm of not knowing. This is quite difficult. We can expound the dharma with this body, we can live the truth; we just can't grasp it. We can feel in our body when we are out of line with it. We want to attune ourselves carefully to our body and mind so that we can notice when we are out of line with our deepest intention. We want to cultivate that intimate knowing without words and ideas—an intimacy with ourself—so that we can tell if we are living our life the way we really want to or whether it is just a little off.

We can do this by just tuning in with ourself, with our fundamental human nature, which is sometimes in Buddhism called buddhanature. Suzuki-roshi tells us human being practicing true human nature is our

meditation. Buddhanature is not something mysterious or arcane. Buddha just means awake; one who is awake. We find out how to be awake and to take responsibility for our life, align ourselves with our true intention, with our true being, with the wisdom and compassion that is already inherent in each being, including ourself.

That is why Zen teacher Kobun Chino says *"It is such a big responsibility that naturally a person sits down for a while"*.