

You only get one mystery

A talk by Abbot Ryushin Paul Haller given at San Francisco City Zen Centre, California on 21st November 2009. Transcribed by Frances Collins and edited by Chris Brown.

There is a Zen story from approximately 1100 years ago and the last line of the story is an exchange between the teacher and student. The student respectfully and diligently asks the teacher if he has any more teachings. The teacher says, 'there is only one mystery. That's the teaching.' So taking it from there, I'd like to read you this poem which is humbly called, 'What the whole thing is about.'

*Got up on a cool morning. Leaned out a window.
No cloud, no wind. Air that flowers held
for awhile. Some dove somewhere.*

*Been on probation most of my life. And
the rest of my life been condemned. So these moments
count for a lot - peace, you know.*

*Let the bucket of memory down into the well,
bring it up. Cool, cool minutes. No one
stirring, no plans. Just being there.*

This is what the whole thing is about.

William Stafford

***“There is only
one mystery.
That's the
teaching.”***

***“Sometimes we
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We just don't
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it!”***

Here's another story. Several years ago I went back to Ireland where I grew up to teach Zen and to visit my family. When I was visiting my family, my sister said about our brother, Gus, “You know, Gus is still smoking. He's had a serious heart attack and he's still smoking. You need to talk to him.” I wasn't smart enough to question the logic of that. I remember reading once somewhere that Suzuki Roshi said, “...and I wasn't smart enough to run away.” So I said I would talk to him. Over a period of a few days, there were various things we were doing together but I could never catch him by himself. Obviously it wasn't something I could say in front of a whole bunch of people. It wasn't that kind of conversation. I watched for a moment but I couldn't find one. After a couple of days my sister asked if I had talked to him. When I said that I hadn't had a chance, she said, “Okay here what's going to happen. We're all going over to Terry's and you two can go together in the car by yourselves.” So I said, “Fair enough, that's a good plan. I'll do it.” So we set off to go to Terry's, Gus's son. We go out and get into the car. He's driving and he immediately turns on the radio and starts singing at the top of his voice!

Sometimes we know what we need to know. We just don't want to know it! Sometimes the request of life is so imposing. It's not that intellectually we need more reasoning. Smoking is not good for health. Okay, how many people who smoke do not know that? I think about 2% or maybe less? Yet somehow or another it felt as if he got the message. He somehow picked up that I was going to be the hitman on this topic, the imported heavy from the States! But eventually he did stop smoking; I don't know how, or if he knows how. I don't know if that was a pivotal moment or an irrelevant annoyance. These moments, as William Stafford so elegantly and reassuringly puts it:-

*Let the bucket of memory down into the well.
Bring it up. Cool, cool minutes. No one
stirring, no plans. Just being there.*

But he does hint at something else... like being on probation most of my life. It has often occurred to me, over many years of practice and endeavoring in that direction, that it's not so much that we need to know more as it is about something more subtle. We need to know what we already know. We need to discover how to put it into action.

***“I want to
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I just returned yesterday from Tassajara, our monastery down in the mountains, where we keep quite a rigorous routine, the daily schedule of meditation and practice. It takes up your time and puts you someplace with the request of your life, the request of the moment, the request of the world.

There is a line by David Whyte: “I want to know if you are prepared to live in the world with its harsh need to change you.”

At Tassajara right now it can be quite cold, at night dropping below 30. There is another Zen story where a student goes to the teacher and says that he “would like to not be too hot or too cold. That’s what I would prefer.” So the teacher asked him why did he not go to the place that was neither too hot nor too cold. So the student said, “Where is that? How do you get there?” The teacher, with radical honesty, said, “Let the heat kill you. Let the cold kill you.” But who wants to hear that? I always think it's more like we're being sorted into heroes or cowards. There you are trying to elbow your way over into the cowards' section saying that you know where you belong, looking for the not too hot, not too cold. But somehow, you look up at the sign and you see that you're in the heroes section. It's like a dream where you wake up at school or college or work with no clothes on, utterly exposed to the cold and wind. How do we not just sing at the top of our voices, where we keep a level of clamour and physical busyness, where there is a well crafted agenda of destruction?

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It's like when you walk in the door of your home and you immediately start checking your e-mail and your voicemail, turn on the radio or the television, your iPod or any other electronic device that can help you not to hear something. What is that thoughtful, careful, patient involvement that inclines us toward those moments where the bucket dips down, where what we know comes to the surface, then we realise what we've been thirsting for? Let's not be naive about the process. It's not so easy to be a hero. Sometimes the skill is in meeting the coward, sensing our own vulnerability. Sometimes it isn't about discipline; sometimes it's about saying, "Okay, this is what is being asked." I am intimidated or confused or distracted or agitated or resentful or fearful or bitter or yearning for something that it doesn't offer me.... whatever way the clamour comes into being. What is the big mind? What is the big heart that can hold that? This is really the essence of zazen, to sit down and somehow devote our being to presence; not a presence that is devoted to this exquisite jewel and excludes everything else, but a presence that opens into inclusion. What is that? That is part of the teaching of zazen; what is the relationship to human existence that can open like that, that has a sense of inclusion and has a willingness to connect with what ever arises.

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It's beautiful in moments of stillness... but maybe there is a deep truth in the fact that we are, and have been, on probation most of our lives. Sometimes it's as if we say, I'll wait and see; I'll wait and see how this all turns out; I'll hold back a little bit or I'll just press on it a little more to see if it becomes more aligned with my agenda. But I would say, that sometimes, almost blessedly, when were singing at the top of our voice, the message gets across. How utterly amazing! What good news that we are singing at the top of our voice because we have already got the message. We just don't like it!



When I was four years old I went to school. When I came home for lunch my mother asked me how it had been and I told her it was okay. So she said that was good, to eat up my lunch, and I was going back again. But I said it was okay but I didn't want to go back again! 'It was okay' meant 'that's enough'. What is it to not be on probation? What is it that that okayness can start to ripen? In other words, this is my whole life. We might think, "Okay, I'm going to go and do zazen and i'm going to be like one of those great Zen people who consider they are so solid and so upright, so courageous and so wise. You could cut their head off with a single blow and they would still sit there because they wouldn't even care. Yup! That's me in the next 25 minutes and after that... well I'm out of here. Now I can breathe again. Ah that's good. I've done my duty. I've taken my medicine." Maybe we learn something about what we are capable of. Maybe the willingness of that measured time will move us in that direction where the solid world that is being created may start to melt, to start to flow, to start to become ideas coming and going and images coming and going, and feelings coming and going, and even sensations of body coming and going. It's like the bucket can dip into that melting liquid and pull up a moment, a moment that is just itself like the cool morning... very still; or maybe as a dove flies over... or maybe not... maybe just the light coming in the window. Maybe just noticing the look in your partner's eyes that somehow, even though you thought you knew everything about them, you hadn't noticed before... or something about yourself. Maybe that moment in the car with my brother when he sang so loud was an exquisite success and had nothing to do with failure and nothing to do with limitation or defeat.

Sometimes we feel like an absolute wreck and then some other days, through the whole day, we are a transcendent Buddha walking in a field of dharma flowers. Usually these are intertwined or mixed together. One of the attributes that we discover in practice is something called pausing. Right in the middle of activity: Pause, Notice, Connect, Abide. Then we discover through our own deliberate efforts to dip down in any moment. Can you dip down into your moment of agitation? What is this world that has come to be and has brought about this state? Who populates it? What sense of self lives in the middle? Is it a naked self that has woken up in college with the teacher staring at you? Is that a child holding its mother's hand? To dip down and to feel the passion in any moment is how we discover a state of being that can dip down and embrace everything. Can you dip down and behold *that* particular state of being and can you hold and meet that experience and be taught by your own fearful bitterness? Can you dip down and hold your own extraordinary selfless generosity? Usually the negative states are more prominent and unnerving. Our moments of generosity and kindness are moments of conclusion; they come with a state of ease but swim on through like nothing special so that somehow we end up with this skewed notion. It is so easy to miss those moments of quiet stillness, to miss the moment where we paused and said, "No, go-ahead" - generosity and consideration. Attending to that creates a particular type of characteristic that must be true because it has a Sanskrit name and a Pali name for itself (!) It's considered to be one of the factors in promoting awakening ('pamoja'), and as it is a Buddhist word it only makes sense that it should be described by a Palestinian Muslim:

***“Can you dip
down into
your moment
of agitation?
Can you dip
down and hold
your own
extraordinary
selfless gener-
osity?”***

Warning

*Lovers of hunting,
and beginners seeking your prey:
Don't aim your rifles
at my happiness,
which isn't worth
the price of the bullet
(you'd waste on it).
What seems to you
so nimble and fine,
like a fawn,
and flees
every which way,
like a partridge,
isn't happiness.
Trust me:
my happiness bears
no relation to happiness.*

Taha Muhammad Ali

This sense of being, this sense of letting the moment crack open and reveal itself whether it is charged and passionate in a solid, convincingly defined, world or whether there is silence and still, deep, momentary existence; whether it is flowing back and forth watching the interplay and the interactions of the moment, any one of them, somehow Pausing, Noticing, Connecting, Abiding, just that as it is; to not be on probation, or working out what you need to do to change it, add to it or subtract from it so that you can be thoroughly committed to being present for it. Something that doesn't hold those arisings as utterly convincing and allows that moment to shine. Pamoja is sometimes translated as gladness, glad to be alive! Taha Muhammad Ali says: don't confuse this for happiness, as something that you can hunt down with your skilled and determined effort; don't think this is something that you can grab, and grasp and package, to carry around with you as if it's one of your possessions. Trust me. It's not that kind of happiness. Yes, we all want happiness but this is not it. This is more singular. This is more unconditioned, and extraordinarily, this is more available because it isn't requiring special accomplishments or experiences. It's requiring a shift in how it's held - the moment that is already here. It's requiring a mind, an awareness, a consciousness, that can open up and hold even the clamour that arises with the moment. So zazen, formally, is to sit down and be present for all that, because something in us knows what that's about. It's the very thing that we know that sets us singing at the top of our voices, and that's listening carefully to us singing at the top of our voices. It helps us discover how not to be trapped, how not to live a life where we are always on probation, waiting for something to turn the way it needs to so that we can exhale and we can say that this is good; so that something in us can be glad; so that something in us can blossom; something in us can be thoroughly woven to be what it is already is. Zazen is the direct expression of that. Zazen is also all the endless ways that we miss the mark, the endless ways we subtract and add something to that, distract ourselves from it, don't quite notice that. It's this extraordinary mystery that the teacher says to the monk, "You get one mystery. It is called being alive." From there everything unpacks; from there everything is like a hand turning outward like a gift. *Everything* teaches how to separate and how to connect.

We study something, we explore something, we be something on our cushion. Then we stand up and we enter the world. We enter the life we are already living. We enter it as a mystery. How can I know and not know? How can I know so thoroughly that it frightens me and I want to sing at the top of my voice? How can I know so thoroughly that it is the most precious thing and that my life is devoted to it? Even though it doesn't quite look like that. This is the great mystery of our human life, that our wisdom and our foolishness are intertwined. With all of the Buddha's teaching and all of the skill, how do you craft your life so that these moments don't happen only once every hundred years?

Tragically these moments often happen for us in moments of tragedy. We have glued the world together into a solid world and the world fiercely tears it apart and the bottom falls out. We can't deny its fluidity. We can't deny its lack of solidity. Sadly, usually we are shocked. We think, "Wait a moment I don't know how to be here! I don't know how to be in a world that has no bottom!" How do we set up a relationship with our life that allows us to get close enough to the well to dip down into it? What kind of priorities do we have to make? What kind of adjustments? How does it affect our relationships? What do we choose to do with our life? What is the inner work that supports this? Should I meditate for six hours every day or should I just make a habit every day as I go through my life, every half hour or so, to just dip down and Pause, Notice, Contact, Engage? Is there some inclining of the mind and the heart, that stimulates inspiration, dedication and motivation? These are the teachings of the spiritual way. These are the teachings that all the religions try to answer.

Here is another poem by Taha Muhammad Ali:

Twigs

Neither music,
fame, nor wealth,
not even poetry itself,
could provide consolation
for life's brevity,
or the fact that King Lear
is a mere eighty pages long and comes to an end,
and for the thought that one might suffer greatly
on account of a rebellious child.
My love for you
is what's magnificent,
but I, you, and the others,
most likely,
are ordinary people.

***“How can I
know and not
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can I know so
thoroughly that
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So I suggest that each of us look not as an intellectual activity but with as deep and stirring involvement as we can, something that we see and feel when in the midst of intense emotions, as if our life depended on it - and in a way, in that moment it does. Can we tap into that? Can it become a resource? Can we align with that? This is the great mystery. Can we align with it? Can we learn from it? Can we see that it's always with us, that it is always presenting in front of us like a hand turned outward and open like a gift, asking us to be both exactly as we are, and also not be fooled by it, asking us to be exactly who we are and *not* on probation, not holding our breath and not singing at the top of our voices. How is such a way of being brought forth?

The one mystery!



Markus Kvist