

The Snowflower Sun

May/June 2017

A ZEN PERSPECTIVE ON “NO BIRTH NO DEATH”

from a talk by Steven Spiro

Thay talks a lot about present moment and many Zen traditions talk about fostering present moment awareness, which can be seen as awareness without time. Western religions teach that eternity is an extension of time infinitely. For Buddhists eternity is outside of time.

So when we cultivate present moment awareness by means of meditation and other practices, from a different perspective we are actually cultivating an awareness of eternity, of a consciousness beyond time. This is crucial for our understanding because birth and death are creatures of time, linear time.

In the poem “Oneness” Thay writes that ‘the moment I die I will come back; I am already with you as I die each moment. The earth I tread this morning transcends history’. These are pretty serious Zen statements, aren’t they, which is to say, they boggle the linear mind. If spring and winter are both present in this moment, it’s the same as saying they’re both present in eternity.

The idea is that every stick has two ends; if one end is birth, the other end is death. If we are going to embrace ‘no birth, no death’, a common phrase in Thay’s teaching, we are also embracing the timelessness of non-duality. And from this standpoint, the linear lifetime that has a historical beginning and a historical ending is suddenly no longer true. Because if there is time, there has to be timelessness. Every pair of opposites co-arises.

Zen teaches “If it is useful, take it. If it’s not useful, forget about it.” I suggest we try the meditation where we align the in-breath with birth and the out-breath with death. When we rest in the space beyond the out-breath, that’s present moment or eternity: the space in which in-breath and out-breath arise. This is our direct experience when we’re meditating -- or doing anything that involves us totally. Time just opens up, isn’t there. This, I think, is the most intimate Zen teaching on death, and it’s what Thay is saying in his poem “Oneness” when he writes, ‘The young leaf and the dead leaf are really one...’

So I’m encouraging you not to see death as something in the future that’s going to happen to you, but to see it as unfolding moment to moment. In this sense I take issue when people say we need to have courage to face death. From a Zen perspective, what we need is fearlessness: to be present with whatever arises with fearlessness. Courage is a thing; fearlessness is not a thing. Fearlessness – non-fear - is present moment awareness.

Our meditation practice – whether it’s *shamata* or mindfulness meditation or formless awareness or focusing on the space between thoughts -- is an essential element of Buddhist practice. We can read, we can study, we can talk all we want, but it’s the practice of meditation that actually gives us the profound experience of timelessness. Fearlessness. Awareness. And while it may seem that being here and now is the opposite of cosmic consciousness, it is, in fact, the only place it can arise. When we’re alive, we’re here, and we’re already dead. There’s nowhere to go. This is the afterlife. This is it. And here it is again! It keeps coming moment to moment. Because all we have is this moment.



Earth’s crammed with heaven,
And every common bush afire with God;
But only he who sees takes off his shoes,
The rest sit round and pluck blackberries.

From Aurora Leigh by Elizabeth Barrett Browning

You will never enjoy the world aright, till the sea itself flows in your veins, till you are clothed with the heavens and crowned with the stars; and perceive yourself to be the sole heir of the whole world, and more than so, because all in it are each one sole heirs as well as you.

Thomas Traherne

May 2017

It is the tradition at SnowFlower to dedicate the entire May/June cycle of sangha meetings to the study and practice of The Five Mindfulness Trainings. It is said that these Trainings offer a lifestyle model that develops the qualities of an awakened person. Ethical guidelines lie at the beginning of every path in every spiritual tradition. Remember that we don't have to do them perfectly. We just have to do them. When our commitment and intention are sincere, they tend to keep themselves. Our mind learns to understand and acts accordingly on its own as it were. When we are truly aware, the response will follow.

| Sundays | Tuesdays | Wednesdays | Fridays |
|-------------------------------------|--|--|--|
| | 5/2 Intro to Thay and SnowFlower – Lisa Glueck Overview of 5 Mindfulness Trainings and Three Refuges – Mary Michal | 5/3 <i>Silence</i> Farm Zendo | 5/5 Overview and Three Refuges – Steven Spiro |
| 5/7 Lead and Host Tod Highsmith | 5/9 First Mindfulness Training – Steven Spiro | 5/10 <i>Silence</i> Farm Zendo | 5/12 The Five Skandhas – Jon Reed |
| 5/14 Lead and Host Geri Gurman | 5/16 Third Mindfulness Training -Amy Krohn | 5/17 <i>Silence</i> Farm Zendo | 5/19 Third Mindfulness Training – Amy Krohn |
| 5/21 Lead and Host Tod Highsmith | 5/23 The Five Skandhas – Jon Reed | 5/24 <i>Silence</i> Farm Zendo | 5/26 First Mindfulness Training – David Haskin |
| 5/28 Lead and Host Geri Gurman | 5/30 Second Mindfulness Training – Bonnie Trudell | 5/31 5 Mindfulness Trainings Farm Zendo | |

SnowFlower Sangha Cancellation Policy

In case of inclement weather, an email will be sent to the listserv by 3:00 pm the day of sangha and a notice will be posted on the door of the Friends Meetinghouse.

Join the SnowFlower email list by emailing Ann Varda at annvarda@gmail.com.



When we console others using our smile and kind words, our capacity for kindness doesn't lessen but increases. Just as water from a perennial spring never dries up no matter how much we draw from it, the more kindness we give, the more it will increase.
 Amma (Mata Amritanandamayi)

June 2017

| Sundays | Tuesdays | Wednesdays | Fridays |
|--------------------------------------|--|---|---|
| | | | 6/2 Intro to Thay and SnowFlower – Lisa Glueck Second Mindfulness Training – Bonnie Trudell |
| 6/4 Lead and Host Pam Moran | 6/6 Evening of Song – Catherine Hammi | 6/7 <i>Silence</i> Farm Zendo | 6/9 Evening of Song – Catherine Hammi and Jane Peckham |
| 6/11 Lead and Host Celeste Robins | 6/13 Fifth Mindfulness Training – Tom Loomis | 6/14 <i>Silence</i> Farm Zendo | 6/16 Fifth Mindfulness Training – Tom Loomis |
| 6/18 Lead and Host Geri Gurman | 6/20 Fourth Mindfulness Training – Gloria Green | 6/21 <i>Silence</i> Farm Zendo | 6/23 Fourth Mindfulness Training – Gloria Green |
| 6/25 Lead and Host Megan Syverson | 6/27 Transmission | 6/28 14 Mindfulness Trainings Farm Zendo | 6/30 Transmission |

Tuesday and Friday Sangha Meetings are held at The Friends Meetinghouse, 1704 Roberts Court, Madison, WI. 7 – 8:30pm.

Wednesday Daytime Sangha Meetings are from 1:30-3 pm every Wednesday at Farm Zendo, 1834 S. Sharpe's Corner Road, Mt. Horeb. Information regarding location and topic will be sent to the listserve every Sunday. For info, contact Mary Gallagher (608) 274-2769 or Susan Pearsall (608) 238- 5929. Wednesday Sangha includes sitting and walking meditation followed by dharma sharing and discussion.

Sunday Morning Sangha Meetings are held at the homes of SnowFlower members from 10 – 11:30 am. Information regarding location and topic will be sent to the listserve every Wednesday. Join by emailing listserv@snowflower.org. Or, call: Tom Loomis (608) 334-4532, Finn Enke (608) 243-7971. Sunday Sangha includes sitting & walking meditation followed by dharma sharing and discussion.



The Buddha, The Dharma, and The Sangha -- The Three Jewels -- are a foundational teaching in Buddhism. The Buddha is the Awakened One, our teacher and guide on the journey. To me, it is important that he was a human being. That he was human means that his teachings are possible for any of us. Thay says, "We are all Buddhas because only through us can understanding and love become tangible and effective." He continues, "The Dharma is what the Buddha taught. Before the Buddha passed away, he said to his students...my physical body will not be here tomorrow, but my teaching body will always be here to help." Continuing in Thay's words, "Dharma and Sangha are the doors through which we enter the heart of the Buddha. Without you the Dharma cannot be practiced. Without each of you the Sangha cannot be."

Joseph Goldstein describes The Buddha as a fundamental archetype of humanity, a pattern that may be reflected in each of our lives and psyches. The Buddha's life becomes a way of understanding our own experience in a larger and more profound context, giving energy and inspiration to our individual journeys. "With mindfulness and insight we can reflect the Buddha's journey in our own".

In his book *Hero with a Thousand Faces*, Joseph Campbell refers often to the life of the Buddha. The first stage of the Hero's Journey is the Call to Destiny or to Adventure. Prince Siddhartha, when he encounters old age, illness, and death for the first time, is made aware of suffering as a part of human existence. The second stage of the Hero's Journey is called Entering the Unknown. For six years the Buddha-to-be lived the austere life of a wandering ascetic and recluse, neglecting and abusing his body.

The third stage in the Hero's Journey is Tests and The Supreme Ordeal. Sitting under the Bodhi tree in the place called Gaya, Siddhartha made the vow not to get up until he had found the way beyond death. Then came Mara the Tempter, the Lord of Illusions, understood as our conditioned responses or negative patterns of thought and action. After various attempts to derail the efforts of the Buddha-to-be, Mara's final desperate attack was to appear to Siddhartha in the form of his own inner voice asking, "Are you worthy?" After countless lifetimes of arduous and sincere practice on the very brink of Enlightenment, doubting himself!

But the Buddha-to-be didn't argue with Mara; he simply lowered the fingertips of his right hand and touched the Earth, asking Her to bear witness for him. At this, Mara ordered his armies to retreat and Siddhartha slipped into the profound stillness in which the distinctions of the separate personality dissolve. When dawn came, he was no longer Siddhartha, the finite personality, but The Buddha, "he who is awake."

The Buddha then spent the watches of the night contemplating aspects of the dharma. During the first watch, he saw countless lifetimes arise and vanish like bubbles on the surface of a stream of water, this wide perspective of lifetimes undercutting the seeming solidity and importance of our attachments and preferences. He contemplated how the karmic force of past actions propels and conditions successive rebirths. Seeing beings driven by ignorance awoke in him the energy of deep compassion. Lastly, he contemplated the Four Noble Truths and the law of dependent origination. He saw how the mind becomes attached, and understood the possibility of deconditioning that attachment and coming to a place of freedom.

Campbell calls the fourth stage Reward and the Journey Home. For The Buddha, this was a coming home to himself and the reward was to know his true nature. He returned to teach The Dharma and to create a Sangha in order to reduce suffering in the world. The journey of awakening -- - to change our habit patterns, to become more conscious, to recognize our cravings, and to reduce the suffering of ourselves and others -- - this is The Buddha's Journey and it is what he taught. It is heroic in that it takes courage and diligence to see ourselves clearly and to act to change that in ourselves which creates suffering. This is the process that The Dharma teaches us.

