

## Dharma Talk 11/21/21 the peace of wild things

Good morning and welcome to Zen Alive. You may be surprised to hear so soon from me again. Unfortunately, I had a cancellation with a very short notice and we are all so busy and the days are short, there is Christmas shopping to do, and there is so much to accomplish. We are caught in what is going on in the news, in our county and country, in court rooms and board rooms. So today I want to remind us of wildness and wilderness, mountains and waters, and zazen. As the opening, I am offering a poem by Wendell Berry calling us to the peace of wild things and the presence of still water.

When despair for the world grows in me  
and I wake in the night at the least sound  
in fear of what my life and my children's lives may be,  
I go and lie down where the wood drake  
rests in his beauty on the water, and the great heron feeds.  
I come into the peace of wild things  
who do not tax their lives with forethought  
of grief. I come into the presence of still water.  
And I feel above me the day-blind stars  
waiting with their light. For a time  
I rest in the grace of the world, and am free."

Last week, our Reading Dogen study group has started on the Mountains and Waters Sutra. And this sutra often brings up thoughts of nature and wildness and wilderness in my mind. In the essay titled Walking, Henry David Thoreau "I wish to speak a word for Nature, for absolute freedom and wildness, as contrasted with a freedom and culture merely civil, — to regard man as an inhabitant, or a part and parcel of Nature, rather than a member of society." In the same essay, he wrote "In wildness is the preservation of the world." In my heart, wildness and Zen and love live closely together - intimately. All these things that want to live without boundary, that want to live in boundlessness, in emptiness, free from all the thou shalt and thou shalt not.

Do you have things like that in your heart, too? Let us close our eyes and sit for a couple of minutes and go look for it in ourselves. I will ring a bell to start and to end.

3 bells - 2-minute sit - 1 bell

Please remember this place in our heart often, it is precious. Dogen begins the mountains and waters sutra:

“These mountains and waters of the present are the expression of the old buddhas. Each, abiding in its own dharma state, fulfills exhaustive virtues. Because they are the circumstances 'prior to the kalpa of emptiness' they are this life of the present; because they are the self “before the germination of any subtle sign,” they are liberated in their actual occurrence. Since the virtues of the mountain are high and broad, the spiritual power to ride the clouds is always mastered from the mountains, and the marvelous ability to follow the wild is inevitably liberated from the mountains.” end quote

Do you understand this? Are these circumstances this life of the present? I do not know. And I do not really understand. When I first encountered Dogen, I did want to know and I did want to understand. I wanted someone to explain it to me, translate the dogenese into something I can get. And once I get it, I can safely package it, box it up, and put it in the appropriate drawer. But the virtues of the mountain are high and broad, the spiritual power to ride the clouds is always mastered from the mountains, and the marvelous ability to follow the wild is inevitably liberated from the mountains. Both the mountains and the wild do not stay put in their boxes and they never fit to begin with.

Of course Dogen is not only talking about mountains, he is talking about our life, this whole world, human society. And How do we grasp it? We don't grasp it, we don't grab for it, don't put it in a box. We don't get it and we don't get to keep it. Maybe we stand in awe, seeing the virtues of the mountain so high and broad. Maybe during zazen, for the briefest moment, we master the spiritual power to ride the clouds. Then we know that we are in the mountains. And maybe one day, unexpectedly, we open the hand of thought and we liberate the marvelous ability to follow the wild. The wild changes continuously according to place and season, and circumstance, though we always know it when we experience it.

We, as practitioners of Zen, we practice zazen. We actively and intentionally do what Wendell Berry touches on in his poem: we go and lie down where the wood drake rests in his beauty on the water, and the great heron feeds. We come into the peace of wild things who do not tax their lives with forethought of grief. We come into the presence of still water and for a time we rest in the grace of the world, and are free. Our way is to sit every day to get in touch with ourselves. The self we get in touch with

is not the conditioned one who usually runs the show. Sometimes this sitting is difficult: anxiety, fear, boredom, thoughts, emotions come up many times in one period of zazen.

One of my favorite zazen practices was the one I learned first: counting my breath. Breath is the link between mind and body. It is one of the very few physiological processes that function both voluntarily and involuntarily. To a certain extent, we can consciously control it when we want to and it happens automatically when we don't. We can slow down or speed up our breathing but we cannot stop it altogether.

Our emotions and external conditions are reflected in our breathing pattern. When we get excited, we breathe faster. When we are in an argument our breath gets tight, in a fight, it may be fast and shallow unless we train as a martial artist. When we're calm, our breathing is deep and regular. In zazen we breathe naturally, without engaging in techniques such as square breathing, counting exhalations from one to ten. When I get distracted, back to one. If I lose count or I find I counted past ten, back to one. Wow, I reached ten! Back to one. We just watch, we watch the breath carefully with as much attention as a burglar breaking into a house. Breath Counting Meditation is a strength-building exercise for the mind. Little by little distracting thoughts calm down, the monkey mind takes a break, and our concentration builds. And yes, I may sit down with a troubled mind and not get past three. Or I may get lost and the first thing I notice is the bell that ends meditation. And I am so grateful for this practice.

Shohaku Okumura wrote this about zazen: "Only in zazen, we stop making karma. When we leave the zendo we have to do something: to do something we have to make choices, and the choices I make depend on my values, which are influenced by my karmic consciousness. I can't be free of karma even when I try to do things simply for the sake of Dharma. That is still my choice and whenever I make a choice I am making new karma, whether good or bad karma. When we stand up from the cushion and go outside, we cannot let go of everything, it would be dangerous. When we leave the zendo, we have to think again."

Come to think of it, my time sitting is a small price to pay. To not be so caught by causes and conditions, the waves of externality not crashing into the shores non=stop. Seeing things clearly, I come into the peace of wild things and I come into the presence of still water. Since the virtues of the mountain are high and broad, the spiritual power to ride the clouds is always mastered from the mountains, and the marvelous ability to follow the wild is inevitably liberated from the mountains.

I would like to end today's talk with the Wendell Berry poem "Do not be ashamed."

You will be walking some night  
in the comfortable dark of your yard  
and suddenly a great light will shine  
round about you, and behind you  
will be a wall you never saw before.  
It will be clear to you suddenly  
that you were about to escape,  
and that you are guilty: you misread  
the complex instructions, you are not  
a member, you lost your card  
or never had one. And you will know  
that they have been there all along,  
their eyes on your letters and books,  
their hands in your pockets,  
their ears wired to your bed.  
Though you have done nothing shameful,  
they will want you to be ashamed.  
They will want you to kneel and weep  
and say you should have been like them.  
And once you say you are ashamed,  
reading the page they hold out to you,  
then such light as you have made  
in your history will leave you.  
They will no longer need to pursue you.  
You will pursue them, begging forgiveness.  
They will not forgive you.  
There is no power against them.  
It is only candor that is aloof from them,  
only an inward clarity, unashamed,  
that they cannot reach. Be ready.  
When their light has picked you out  
and their questions are asked, say to them:  
"I am not ashamed." A sure horizon  
will come around you. The heron will begin  
his evening flight from the hilltop.

by Wendell Berry