

New Beginning



At the first Coastside Vipassana dhamma talk this year, Jim Bronson suggested we look at new beginnings, and particularly at grounding ourselves here and now, mindful of the Earth. To set the context, Jim opened with a poem by Navarre Scott Momaday, the Poet Laureate of Oklahoma, who won the Pulitzer Prize for the first Native American-written book, "A House Made of Dawn," published in 1968.

The Earth

Once in his life a man ought to concentrate his mind upon the remembered earth, I believe. He ought to give himself up to a particular landscape in his experience, to look at it from as many angles as he can, to wonder about it, to dwell upon it. He ought to imagine that he touches it with his hands at every season and listens to the sounds that are made upon it. He ought to imagine the creatures there and all the faintest motions of the wind. He ought to recollect the glare of noon and all the colors of the dawn and dusk. For we are held by more than the force of gravity to the earth. It is the entity from which we are sprung, and that into which we are dissolved in time. The blood of the whole human race is invested in it. We are moored there, rooted as surely, as deeply as are the ancient redwoods and bristlecones.

- Navarre Scott Momaday

"Too often, people think that solving the world's problems is based on conquering the earth, rather than touching the earth, touching ground."

- Chogyam Trungpa

Life is a river, a stream flowing swiftly, always changing and rushing towards the ocean. Some of us wade out to the middle of the stream, gripping the river bed with our toes, fighting the current. Things we desire flow past us in the river. We try to grasp them, but they elude us, slipping out between our fingers, carried away in the current. If we relax and loosen our grip on the river bed, we can float down the stream, weaving in and out of life's

experiences. The river is how things are. If we accept it, we are at ease. If we fight it, we wear ourselves out, gaining nothing.

We are entering a time of change and economic insecurity. Clinging to our belongings and attaching to today's situation may be beyond our ability to grasp, and will cause us suffering.

"There are times to cultivate and create, when you nurture your world and give birth to new ideas and ventures. There are times of flourishing and abundance, when life feels in full bloom, energized and expanding. And there are times of fruition, when things come to an end. They have reached their climax and must be harvested before they begin to fade. And finally of course, there are times that are cold, and cutting and empty, times when the spring of new beginnings seems like a distant dream. Those rhythms in life are natural events. They weave into one another as day follows night, bringing, not messages of hope and fear, but messages of how things are."

- Chogyam Trungpa

Spiritual work does not help us escape from reality, but teaches us to accept it. We are as we are.

"When people start to meditate or to work with any kind of spiritual discipline, they often think that somehow they're going to improve, which is a sort of subtle aggression against who they really are. It's a bit like saying, "If I jog, I'll be a much better person." "If I could only get a nicer house, I'd be a better person." If I could meditate and calm down, I'd be a better person."... But loving-kindness--maitri--toward ourselves doesn't mean getting rid of anything. Maitri means that we can still be crazy after all these years. We can still be angry after all these years. We can still be timid or jealous or full of feelings of unworthiness. The point is not to try to throw ourselves away and become something better. It's about befriending who we are already. The ground of practice is you or me or whoever we are right now, just as we are. That's the ground, that's what we study, that's what we come to know with tremendous curiosity and interest."

--Pema Chodron, The Wisdom of No Escape and the Path of Loving-Kindness

"Most people think of enlightenment as a kind of magical attainment, a state of being close to perfection. At this level, one can perform amazing feats, see past and future lives of others, and tune in to the inner workings of the universe. This may be possible for a number of special beings, but for most of us enlightenment is much more in line with what Suzuki Roshi describes. It means having a quality of "beginningness," a fresh, simple, unsophisticated view of things. To have "beginner's mind" in how we approach things is a major teaching. In many ways, the process of

enlightenment is clearing away the thoughts, beliefs, and ideas that cloud our ability to see things as they really are in their pristine form."

--David A. Cooper, Silence, Simplicity and Solitude

Life carries us relentlessly towards death. Both are the same body of water, just at different points.

"According to the wisdom of Buddha, we can actually use our lives to prepare for death. We do not have to wait for the painful death of someone close to us or the shock of terminal illness to force us into looking at our lives. Nor are we condemned to go out empty-handed at death to meet the unknown. We can begin, here and now, to find meaning in our lives. We can make of every moment an opportunity to change and to prepare--wholeheartedly, precisely, and with peace of mind--for death and eternity. In the Buddhist approach, life and death are seen as one whole, where death is the beginning of another chapter of life. Death is a mirror in which the entire meaning of life is reflected."

--Sogyal Rinpoche, The Tibetan Book of Living and Dying

Stephen Levine, a counselor for the terminally ill, took the idea of using life to prepare for death, and put it into practice. "What if," he asks, "you are told you have one year to live? How would you live it?" On New Year's in 1994, he and his wife made a vow to live the next year as if it were their last.

"Awareness is itself a healing quality. Where awareness is focused the deepest potentials for clarity and balance present themselves. Though what we are aware of may be incessantly changing, awareness itself remains a constant, a luminous spaciousness without beginning or end, without birth or death. It is the essence of life itself. It is what remains when all that is impermanent falls away. It is the deathless. "I am suggesting living a year so profoundly alive that we directly experience the moment-to-moment process that is our lives. We take responsibility for being alive, recognizing that responsibility is the ability to respond instead of the compulsion to react. We explore it all: that in us which at times wishes to be dead as well as that in us which never dies. That which blocks the heart and confuses the mind as well as that which clears confusion and dissolves obstruction[I am suggesting] we break the dreamlike quality of a half-attended life."

A Year to Live: How to Live This Year as If It Were Your Last, by Stephen Levine

What if we were to live each year as if it were our last?

"How to make our lives an embodiment of wisdom and compassion is the greatest challenge spiritual seekers face. The truths we have come to understand need to find their visible expression in our lives. Our every thought, word, or action holds the possibility of being a living expression of clarity and love. It is not enough to be a possessor of wisdom. To believe ourselves to be custodians of truth is to become its opposite, is a direct path to becoming stale, self-righteous, or rigid. Ideas and memories do not hold liberating or healing power. There is no such state as

enlightened retirement, where we can live on the bounty of past attainments. Wisdom is alive only as long as it is lived, understanding is liberating only as long as it is applied. A bulging portfolio of spiritual experiences matters little if it does not have the power to sustain us through the inevitable moments of grief, loss, and change. Knowledge and achievements matter little if we do not yet know how to touch the heart of another and be touched."

-- Christina Feldman and Jack Kornfield, Stories of the Spirit, Stories of the Heart

Thank you, Jim, for your teaching.