

Alive or Dead?



Last night, Misha Merrill gave a Dharma talk on “Alive or Dead? -- Reflections on Simplicity”

Misha was ordained a Zen priest in 1988 by Les Kaye Roshi in the lineage of Shunryu Suzuki-Roshi of the San Francisco Zen Center. She received Dharma Transmission from him in 1998 and has been leading a meditation group in Redwood City since 1993. She also teaches young children at the Peninsula School of Menlo Park.

Misha read a zen koan, Case 55 from The Blue Cliff Record, Dogo's Condolence Call." This is about a master and a student who go to a funeral a long, long time ago in China.

Dogo and Zengen went to a house to make a condolence call. Zengen hit the coffin (with his stick, like that) and said, "Alive or dead?" Dogo said, "I won't say alive, and I won't say dead." Zengen said, "Why won't you say?" And Dogo said, "I won't say." And then as they were walking back, Zengen said, "Teacher, you have to tell me right away. If you don't tell me, I'll hit you." Dogo, the teacher, said, "You can hit me, but I won't say." Zengen then hit him.

The student is wonderful because he was so eager that he hit the teacher trying to intimidate him into giving him the answer. The teacher is wonderful because the teacher keeps holding the student so that the student can find it out in the student's own heart.

Later Dogo, the teacher, died. Zengen went to his new teacher, and brought up that story. The teacher said, "I won't say alive; I won't say dead." The student said, "Why won't you say?" The teacher said, "I won't say, I won't say." At these words, suddenly, Zengen's heart opened and he became enlightened.

What does this story mean? We will return to it in a moment.

Misha welcomed the newcomers. They have a wonderful advantage over those who are more experienced. Misha's teacher, Shunryu Suzuki Roshi, used to say "In the beginner's mind there are many possibilities, but in the expert's there are few."

Abbess Zenkei Blanche Hartman, another student of Shunryu Suzuki Roshi, explains Beginner's Mind this way:

Beginner's mind is Zen practice in action. It is the mind that is innocent of preconceptions and expectations, judgments and prejudices. Beginner's mind is just present to explore and observe and see "things as-it-is." I think of beginner's mind as the mind that faces life like a small child, full of curiosity and wonder and amazement. "I wonder what this is? I wonder what that is? I wonder what this means?" Without approaching things with a fixed point of view or a prior judgment, just asking "what is it?"

Earlier this week I was having lunch with Indigo, our small child at City Center. He saw an object on the table and got very interested in it. He picked it up and started fooling with it: looking at it, putting it in his mouth, and banging on the table with it-just engaging with it without any previous idea of what it was. For Indigo, it was just an interesting thing, and it was a delight to him to see what he could do with this thing. You and I would see it and say, "It's a spoon. It sits there and you use it for soup." It doesn't have all the possibilities that he finds in it.

Watching Indigo, you can see the innocence of "What is it?"

Can we look at our lives in such a way? Can we look at all of the aspects of our lives with this mind, just open to see what there is to see? I don't know about you, but I have a hard time doing that. I have a lot of habits of mind-I think most of us do. Children begin to lose that innocent quality after a while, and soon they want to be "the one who knows." We all want to be the one who knows. But if we decide we "know" something, we are not open to other possibilities anymore. And that's a shame. We lose something very vital in our life when it's more important to us to be "one who knows" than it is to be awake to what's happening. We get disappointed because we expect one thing, and it doesn't happen quite like that. Or we think something ought to be like this, and it turns out different. Instead of saying, "Oh, isn't that interesting," we say, "Yuck, not what I thought it would be." Pity.

*The very nature of beginner's mind is not knowing in a certain way, not being an expert. As Suzuki Roshi said in the prologue to *Zen Mind Beginner's Mind*, "In the beginner's mind there are many possibilities, in the expert's there are few." As an expert, you've already got it figured out, so you don't need to pay attention to what's happening. Pity.*

Susan Bender wrote a book on the Amish, called *Plain and Simple*. <http://www.amazon.com/Plain-Simple-Womans-Journey-Amish/dp/0062501860/>

The Amish keep their lives simple. They do not compete with each other. All dress the same, in plain and simple practical clothing that does not change style. No one tries to have the fanciest furniture or the biggest house or the shiniest toy. The Amish do not have funeral homes or undertakers - when someone dies, the men build a casket, and services are held in the home.

In our society, we work for a goal - to retire, to buy an expensive possession, to show how successful we are, to take a trip to Europe. Work is to get something. For the Amish, however, the purpose of work is work. Work is valued for its own sake, not as a means to an end. The Amish take care of their needs, but do not go beyond that. As Gandhi said, 'Earth provides enough to satisfy every man's need, but not every man's greed.'

In our society, when you ask someone how they are, you often get an answer about how busy that person is. We frequently hear, "There aren't enough hours in the day." The Amish, on the other hand, do not rush and do not make haste.

In our rushing around, we do not get a chance to enjoy life. We complicate things, and make them difficult. This is the lesson of the beginner's mind.

When Zengen hit the coffin, and asked "Alive or Dead?" he was complicating things. Dogo showed him great kindness by refusing to play that game.

The past is done. The future hasn't happened yet. All we have is the present, the Now. Rushing around to do things and complicating things, keeps us from experiencing the joy of the Now.

There are several types of death. There is the anonymous death of strangers, such as when Hurricane Katrina hit. We can feel compassion for the people affected, even though we do not know them. Then there is the death of a beloved. When someone we know dies, someone we love, we feel grief and loss. Then there is our own death, a matter which we may fear, dread, or deny.

Another type of death, and the worst, is the death of not being aware of whether you are dead or alive. Thinking constantly of the future, and what has to be done next, or dwelling in the past, we are not able to appreciate and enjoy life. It will pass us by unnoticed. Rushing is not living.

In medieval Japan, the Samurai embraced Zen and its emphasis on the Now. The Way of the Samurai was said to be found in death, living as though one was already dead, and that a samurai retainer must be willing to die at any moment in order to be true to his lord. The impermanence of life was fully accepted. The Hagakure says, "If by setting one's heart right every morning and evening, one is able to live as though his body were already dead, he gains freedom in the Way. "

The Buddha did not speak much of death or what comes after. A samurai once asked Zen Master Hakuin where he would go after he died. Hakuin answered 'How am I supposed to know?' 'How do you know? You're a Zen master!' exclaimed the samurai. 'Yes, but not a dead one,' Hakuin answered.

Live the Now. Suzuki Roshi told us that the more we meditate, the more we will be interested in everyday life.

In her poem "When Death Comes," Mary Oliver has a few lines that say, "When it's over, I want to say I have been a bride married to amazement, I've been a bridegroom taking the world into my arms." This is beginner's mind: "I've been a bride married to amazement." Just how amazing the world is, how amazing our life is. How amazing that the sun comes up in the morning or that the wisteria blooms in the spring. "A bride married to amazement, a bridegroom taking the world into my arms." Can you live your life with that kind of wholeheartedness, with that kind of thoroughness? This is the beginner's mind that Suzuki Roshi is pointing to, is encouraging us to cultivate. He is encouraging us to see where we are stuck with fixed views, and see if we can, as Uchiyama Roshi says, "open the hand of thought" and let the fixed view go. This is our effort. This is our work. Just to be here, ready to meet whatever is next without expectation or prejudice or preconceptions. Just, "What is it?" "What is this, I wonder?"

- Abbess Zenkei Blanche Hartman