

## If Not Now, When?

To live a life of Zen is to live in the mysticism of the now, of the particular and concrete. What does this living in the now mean? It is as simple as Zen Enlightenment: the now is the now! We live in the now, everything flows through the now, we cannot jump out of the now. Jesus said, "Look at the lilies of the field, and the birds of the air; do not be anxious for tomorrow, tomorrow will take care of itself." A Christian spiritual master, Jean de Caussade, talked of the Sacrament of the Now. He said, you cannot touch god or Reality except in the now of your living. He talked of Abandonment or Surrender to god in the Now. Do not seek god somewhere else. Just be present, be aware, respond to life as it comes to you Here and Now.

Simple, isn't it? Yet this apparent simplicity is full of traps and pitfalls. They appear when living in the present becomes a means of indulging our ego-self. Living in the Now becomes, for many of us, the philosophy of Carpe Diem: enjoy the day as long as it lasts. I don't need to stress that this is completely counter-productive.

You can enter the Now only as a free and conscious Subject. This involves taking responsibility for yourself, learning to accept your desires and not live by the desires and expectations of others. It is only by being true to yourself, to your heart's desires and decisions, and taking responsibility for yourself that you become yourself and begin to live truly. In this process, the images of god

as a super other standing over and against you have to go. God has to die.

On the other hand, becoming oneself as a free subject involves meeting the human other as other. All of this is part of the process of self-becoming. It is a process that leads to being open to the infinite, as an emptiness that can never be controlled, comprehended or closed. It is an openness and mystery coming into existence without end through surrender, from the inmost centre of one's being, into the Mystery of love. It is the transformation that comes from losing oneself and discovering oneself as 'I AM' and 'I AM LOVE'. This Self embraces all the world and yet comes to be only through the narrow door of the Here and the Now.

The verse *On Believing in the Mind* by the Third Patriarch of Zen in China ends with these words:

*The Way is beyond language, for in it there is  
no yesterday  
no tomorrow  
no today.*

Only when you have touched the beyond-of-time, only when you have experienced Eternity, can you come to live in and appreciate time and history. We humans live in time as well as in Eternity. Eternity is not apart from time and history. Time is but the rainbow of Eternity. Space is often used as a symbol for Nirvana; for space is without bounds, all are present in space simultaneously; space is pure and not sullied by the things of the world. However, time is more vital to human living and is a better symbol. Of course, time and space are only two dimensions of one reality. Looking at time, time means that life is ever coming anew, is an adventure, is open-ended. We humans are stretched between the past and the future and long for what is not, as the

poet says. Time is not a linear, one-dimensional reality. The past is with us Here and Now, we are what we have been. All the past is gathered up in us and is here and now. The future is not somewhere in the far away. It is in the Here and Now, influencing us in terms of our hopes, dreams, longings and fears. Our selves are stretched between the past and the future, in memory and hope, fear and longing, guilt and responsibility. The future is not simply in front of us; it comes from our hidden, unknown depths; the past dwells in our depths too. The depths are beyond our complete comprehension. We live out of the depths, but the depths also well up and confront us. Depth implies possibilities and movement. All conscious action is movement, movement forward, which is towards the future or towards possibilities; this is to live and to love in response and responsibility. You are called, you respond.

Since the past and the future are in the Now, we can also change and reshape them. The past comes to us in memory and imagination. It is through the imagination, driven by the heart's longings, that we dwell in the past and the future even as we live in the Now. Thus, we can re-shape and re-envision our past through imagination. The past is to be seen anew and re-fashioned, forgiven and accepted in gratitude. The future can be received in trusting openness and hope. Past memories need to be healed, forgiven, or celebrated and the future anticipated in joy and trust. We live and move not in the so-called brute facts, but in memory, imagination and emotion. Humans are interpreting animals and we are beings of imitative desires. We create and re-create, tell and re-tell the reality of ourselves, others and the world in imaginative narrative and story. Myths, metaphors, symbols and language are our clothing and the expression of our desires, passions, loves and visions. Memory and imagination are the powers of the heart for creation and re-creation.

Reality is greater than our individual ego-self. We normally experience reality and the world through our bounded ego-selves. But our self is not merely bound within the individual skin and body. Our self dwells in the in-between of self and others. I am not I except in relation to others.

Each of us is interdependent. Our identity is not a closed identity, closed in on oneself; it is an open identity. It is through meeting others, in dialogue and exchange, that we become ourselves. More, we are basically an openness—only by actualizing this openness again and again, can we be true to ourselves, be authentic. I, the person, is openness to the entire universe; the universe comes forth as the I, the Subject. At the same time, it is in this body, in this heart-mind, in this locus, that I live and realize reality and truth. The True Self is not apart from this body-mind-heart self, but shines forth as Subject, as I.

Reality is Here and Now. But it is in many layers, many dimensions, many forms, many kinds—depth upon depth, layer upon layer, one going through the other. Our mind cannot comprehend all of it. It is full of paradoxes, contradictions, ambiguities, indeterminacies; it is partly revealed and partly hidden, transparent yet mysterious. We are in the midst of an ever-flowing stream; we are flowing with the stream and we are the stream. Religions talk of heaven and hell, of life-after-life. There is only this life, in its many layers and many depths. There is only Now. Now, of course, is not a point of time—it is a way of being present to ourselves and others and the world; being aware, accepting to live life to the full, responding to the call of love and life.

Religious traditions and rituals fulfil certain needs and functions. But religious dogmas and doctrines are not to be taken literally. Literalism kills the spirit. The myths and symbols, stories and parables of the different religions have been given to us to console, guide, open up and enrich our imagination and emotions.

Unfortunately, people too often take dogmas, beliefs and doctrines to be literal truths. They then become blind to life and love, they become sleepwalkers, and worse, fanatics and zealots. Religion is both a gift and a problem. Organized, institutional religion, besides protecting its tradition and its original vision, often assumes authoritarian hierarchy, power and control. It becomes concerned primarily with survival and power. This part of religion does not want us to become mature and free. It wants children who will faithfully obey, support and serve it. It alienates and is oppressive. Organized, institutional religion is necessary, it is good to belong to one, but one has to learn to keep one's critical distance and freedom.

Standing in the in-between of religions offers us today a most fruitful form of spirituality. One theologian talks of 'passing over' and coming back. Passing over, *pascha*, into another religious tradition and spirituality and then coming back to one's own, transformed and reformed. In passing over mind and heart into another one, one dies to one's own particular, self-enclosed religion; in coming back, one is born in spirit and truth. When we are identified totally with one religion, we lose our souls. Passing over and coming back, or better *standing in-between*, the spirit becomes freed and we come into our goodness and compassionate humanity. Standing in-between, the self stands nowhere and yet embraces all. The self is open to the infinite, yet its home is in the particular and the concrete, in the Here and the Now. It has no boundaries and no limits, yet it is through the door of the ethical life that it comes into life and reality.

*Standing nowhere, let the mind come forth*, challenges a *koan*. It urges you to realize ultimate reality and truth. No answer borrowed from others or from scriptures will do. You have to come to a personal Realization and actualization. It is a personal journey into a never ending horizon that is mystery. It is said that the saint will not know who she/he is until the consummation of

the communion of the saints; which is to say, not until the end of time when all are gathered up. You cannot know your name apart from all the names of the world. Your Self is an openness to the All, which can be realized only in the journeying. The journey begins with the first step Here and Now. And every step is the first step. Where do you begin?

Meister Eckhart was asked, "Where does the soul go after death?" He replied, "Nowhere!" There is nowhere else than the Here and Now. There is a Sufi saying: "There is a time when you journey *towards* god and there is a time when you journey *in* god." Once you Awaken to reality, then all your life is nowhere else than in god. Perhaps not so much in god, as god herself living your life as 'I'.

Let me give you a Zen story:

A soldier named Nobushige came to Hakuin, and asked, "Is there really a paradise and a hell?" "Who are you?" inquired Hakuin. "I am a samurai," the warrior replied. "You, a soldier!" exclaimed Hakuin. "What kind of ruler would have you as his guard? Your face looks like that of a beggar." Nobushige became so angry that he began to draw his sword. But Hakuin continued, "So you have a sword! Your weapon is probably much too dull to cut off my head." As Nobushige drew his sword Hakuin remarked, "Here open the gates of hell!" At these words the samurai, perceiving the master's discipline, sheathed his sword and bowed. "Here open the gates of paradise," said Hakuin.

Our home is in the community of imperfect, wounded human beings. No relationship will be perfect and completely fulfilling; all relationships involve hurt and failures. This only calls us to learn to accept ourselves and let ourselves be accepted by others, in our neediness and imperfection. Courage and freedom arise in our standing in fidelity to this community of love. And they are nourished by gratitude and compassion. True religion and spirituality give us a vision of reality as mystery,

mystery that is graciousness. You are held in love and you are love—learn how to love yourselves and to love all beings, *today*. To be love, in non-violence. Today is the day of salvation. “Today you will be in paradise with me,” were the dying words of Jesus. Let me end with the beautiful and inspiring words of Rabbi Hillel:

*If you are not friends with yourself,  
Who will be?  
If you are only that, what are you?  
If not now, when?*