

MY COTTAGE AT DEEP SOUTH MOUNTAIN

Sometimes it is helpful to incorporate mantras, koan study, Buddhist ideas such as impermanence, or teaching poems and chants into our practice of just sitting. Many years ago, after diligently practicing *just sitting*, my first Zen teacher asked me to incorporate this poem into my practice. Over a year or so I would silently recite the poem or a particular part of the poem at the beginning of my sitting. Many years later, I can still follow its echoes the way I follow the bell at the beginning of Zazen as I enter into the Great Silence of *just sitting*.

In my middle years

The imagery of most of Wang Wei's poems is descriptive and symbolic. So, while he may be telling us that he was past age 50 when he wrote this poem, he is also telling us that he was in the "midst of life." I think that this deeper meaning of "middle years" describes the state where most of us start looking for something else. When we feel that our life, as we are living it, is in some sense unsatisfactory we begin searching for another way.

I have grown fond of the Way

The Chinese word used for "Way" is Tao. It is a word that is used for an ordinary path or road where ordinary people walk. It could be used to describe Pierce St. But it evolved to mean "method," and finally it came to mean the cosmic principle underlying the universe. Thus, it can be used to describe the relative and the absolute. As we shall see when study Tozan-Ryokai's *Five Ranks*, the heart of Zen practice is experiencing the different ways that the absolute and relative interact in our lives.

This poem illustrates these three sense of "Tao." Wang Wei followed well known paths to find his mountain hermitage and once there he followed the method of Zen practice. Finally he experienced the ineffable Way of the Universe that is beyond the first two senses of the term:

The Tao that can be spoken is not the eternal Tao
The name that can be named is not the eternal name
The nameless is the origin of Heaven and Earth.

and by Deep South Mountain I make my home.

Here the poet is saying that he is a follower of the Southern school of Zen Buddhism. The distinction of northern and southern is not so much geographical as it is doctrinal. The Southern school emphasized sudden enlightenment while the northern school stressed a more methodical, gradual approach. The Soto Zen that we are practicing stems from the Southern school. Our way emphasizes beginner's mind which has no stages, or more precisely, it is before any stage of practice. But at the same time we also value experience—years of experience—which may be more of a gradual process of development over time.

When happy I go alone into the mountains

In many Zen stories as well as tales from other sacred traditions, mountains are used to describe inaccessible places where hermits practice, apart from the troubles of the world. Pilgrimages up sacred mountains symbolize aspiration and renunciation of worldly desires. The entrance to a Zen temple is called the Mountain Gate. This gate symbolizes crossing the boundary from worldly desires and conceptual thinking into emptiness. When one reaches a mountain peak, the sky seems closer and one can physically experience the meeting of the higher and the lower. When you look into the night sky from a mountain peak, one often feels the awe and wonder that become our wish to practice.

Seeing only the sights that I can see.

This line has also been translated as *Only I understand this joy*. Wang Wei is telling us that even though he is following the ancient practice of the ancestors and patriarchs, he is also following his own way through the mountains. While sitting and engaging in other practices of the Way he is seeing the fullness of his own inner life. By taking *the backward step that turns the light and shines it inward*, he sees his own subjectivity as well as the ineffable reality of Buddha nature that we all share. Zen koans and other teaching stories are filled with exhortations to reveal our original face. In one sense there is only one original face: Buddha nature, but in another sense we each have our own original face. After I described an unusual feeling that I had when looking at a tree in Golden Gate Park, my teacher said, “Ah, you saw its original face!”

**I walk until the water ends, and sit
waiting for the hour when clouds rise.**

Life is like a stream or river moving downhill, away from its source under the laws of gravity. He tells us to change the direction of our lives and return to our original nature. Using poetic imagery he illustrates Dogen's statement in Fukanzazengi, *Learn to take the backward step that turns the light and shines it inward. Body and mind of themselves will drop away, and your original face will manifest.* This is what we try to do when we sit down on our cushions.

So, this is what Zen calls the *turning phrase*, or heart, of the poem. In my experience, these two lines provided an "image context" for my search into the nameless, wordless, and unknown reality of myself. I felt like the 19th century explorer who discovered a possible source of the Nile, when my teacher asked me to give him details of what I had found. During our practice interviews, he would blurt out questions about the weather and texture of the ground quite unexpectedly, and I at first, would have no immediate response. If I waited more than a second or two he would send me back to my cushion to continue. Some days I would say something, but it was too theoretical and removed from my immediate experience and he would wave me away. But one day I blurted out: "wet, cold, mud, blue sky, no breeze, no air..." He smiled and gave me another Koan.

**If I happen to meet an old woodcutter,
I chat with him, laughing and forget to go home.**

The last line is sometimes translated as "I forget about the time." Wang Wei ends the poem by saying that he realizes that he is fine exactly where he is. He sees that there is no other place where he has to be. We may be on a mountain peak, or resting beside a stream, or walking to our cars on Pierce St; it does not matter. We need to be alive in the exact moment of our life without any ideas of being anywhere else.

Our diligent practice, will show us the various ways, some literal and some metaphorical, that we can leave the comforts of our ordinary lives to find that *something else* that we all wish for. After we find this deep place in ourselves, we will feel comfortable wherever we are. There is a popular book, *Wherever You Go, There You are*, by Jon Kabat-Zinn, that illustrates this major part of Zen practice.

My Zen practice has recently led me to be ordained as a Soto Zen priest. The name of the Priest Ordination ceremony is Shuke Tokudo, or Home-leaving. A week before the ceremony my teacher asked me to go on a solitary retreat in the Santa Cruz mountains so that I could experience what it means to leave home. On the

second day, I decided to take a long walk up to the ridge. I don't have a very good sense of direction so after walking for a half hour or so I completely lost track of where I had come from. So I just sat down on a tree trunk and waited. After a while, I felt that it was fine to be exactly where I was, even if that meant I was *lost*. Feeling more at ease in *not knowing* where I was I was able to continue on to the top. When I got there I was able to see where I had come from. More important, I was able to see my life in a new perspective. I knew that I would return to San Francisco in a few days, but in a deeper sense I felt that wasn't nearly as important as it had been a few days before.

Many years ago I took my three year old daughter to my first teacher's house. While my teacher and I talked, she walked around the house. When she came back to us, she said that this was just like her home. My teacher responded, "You should have that feeling wherever you go."

Another way of saying that one should feel at home everywhere is to say that one should not have a fixed home, or at least one should not be attached to where one is living. Hongzhi, an immediate predecessor of Dogen put it this way: *A person of the Way fundamentally does not dwell anywhere. The white clouds are fascinated with the green mountain's foundation. The bright moon cherishes being carried along with the flowing water. The clouds part and the mountains appear. The moon sets and the water is cool. Each bit of autumn contains vast interpenetration without bounds.*

Sawaki Roshi, a well respected 20th century Zen teacher, nicknamed Homeless *Kodo*, said, *Everyone is homeless. It is a mistake if you think that you have a fixed home.* Some people take this idea quite literally and leave their family and job and home to become solitary wanderers of The Way. Buddha did this. But most of us feel that we are not called to be hermits. We are searching for another way to live our lives *in the world*. As Christians have said, *we want to be in the world but not of it.* We need to see that feeling homeless is to experience our life, as we have been taught to live it, as lacking something indefinable but essential. This way of life is what we are asked to leave. We need to let go of our attachments to the comfort and familiarity of our lives. We need to look at our lives in a new way. *We need to feel homeless.*

On your way home tonight, please think about this.